

Economic Development Commission

Meeting Minutes

Thursday, March 6, 2025

8 a.m.

Via Zoom

I. Welcome and Call to Order

Chairwoman Debbie Walsworth called the meeting to order at 8 a.m.

Members Present: Ted Bautz, Al Bond, Dr. Cliff Coppersmith, Reza Jafari, Kristen Kleppinger Cornish for Chris Kleppinger, Ken Kozel, Amy Kreiner, David Montgomery, Micah Risher, Clay Stamp, Terenda Thomas, Cassandra Vanhooser, Deborah Walsworth, Jackie Wilson

Members Absent: Shannon Potter Dill, Chuck Callahan, Walter Chase, John Horner, Rob Straebel

Guests: Liz Connelly, Holly DeKarske, Susie Hayward, Nancy LaJoice, Cristy Morrell, Dana Newman, Ryan Snow, Dawn Starkey, Scott Warner

Staff: Kristen Goller

II. Approval of Agenda and Meeting Minutes

Ms. Walsworth 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. Dr. Coppersmith seconded the motion, which passed unanimously.

III. County Council Report – Clay B. Stamp

Mr. Stamp noted that Council President Callahan is traveling and unable to attend the meeting. The Council sends warm greetings, and Mr. Stamp reported on the following.

- Many Talbot County projects are moving forward and are creating jobs locally. Mr. Stamp reported that the new **Public Safety** facility at Mary's Court is almost finished, and the **Airport Modernization Project** is proceeding according to plan. Demolition of the Talbot County Business Center (a.k.a. the former Black and Decker Building) began this week.
- The **budget process** is underway for Talbot County. The upward trajectory of recent budgets is not sustainable. Citizens should see a flattened budget this year. Mr. Stamp is required to submit a balanced budget to the Council. The review process will take several months, and the Council members have the ability to change his recommendation. The budget will be introduced on April 15 and will be approved on May 27.

IV. Director's Report – Cassandra M. Vanhooser

Ms. Vanhooser thanked EDC members for being flexible and joining the meeting via Zoom. She updated the board on the department's priority projects.

Strategic Plan Update: The strategic plan is progressing as scheduled. Meetings are held biweekly with Dan Gundersen and Lindsay Johnson of Camoin Associates. Much of the work completed thus far has been administrative, ensuring all necessary preparations are in place for success. As previously mentioned in an email on Monday, March 3, Camoin Associates representatives will visit the county from March 12-14 to familiarize themselves with the area. During this visit, one-on-one meetings will be conducted with each County Council member, as well as with the Economic Development Commission, on March 13. Attendance is strongly encouraged. Efforts will be made to keep the meeting to 90 minutes. Additionally, an agenda and a list of general questions to be addressed will be shared immediately following the meeting to facilitate preparation.

Economic Impact Study: In addition to the strategic plan, Camoin Associates has been engaged to conduct an economic impact study on the healthcare industry in Talbot County. This study is a prerequisite for an EDA grant application for water, sewer, and utility infrastructure to serve the new Regional Medical Center. Work on this initiative is being carried out in collaboration with the project team from the Town of Easton, Easton Utilities, and Talbot County. Despite the uncertainties surrounding federal funding, the application process is proceeding as planned.

A prior economic impact study on the healthcare industry in Talbot County was completed in 2007, focusing on retaining a hospital in Easton. That study was conducted by Anirban Basu and Sage Policy Group. However, because of their unavailability for timely completion, a contract amendment was executed to include this study under Camoin Associates' scope of work.

Talbot Works Business Academy: The Talbot Works Business Academy is currently in progress, with the fourth session having concluded on Tuesday, March 4. Cohort #3 consists of 15 dedicated business owners. A special acknowledgment was extended to Scott Warner for securing funding for this third cohort through the Mid-Shore Regional Council and the Rural Maryland Prosperity Investment Fund. Additionally, the Talbot County Council has allocated \$60,000 in small grants for businesses that successfully complete all academy requirements. Each graduate will receive a \$2,000 grant to invest in their business.

This will be the last grant-funded cohort. Ms. Vanhooser has requested in the FY26 budget for another cohort. By that time, the small grant funds will have been fully utilized, necessitating a reevaluation of the program's future direction.

Opportunities for involvement in the academy by EDC members are available. The program spans eight weeks, concluding with participant presentations outlining their businesses and growth plans. Ms. Vanhooser needs judges to provide feedback on these presentations, which will take place via Zoom on March 25 from 5:45-8 p.m. Participation is encouraged to gain further insight into the Talbot Works Business Academy and the resilience of the small business community.

Business Appreciation Summit: Preparations are underway for the Business Appreciation Summit, scheduled for April 10 at 8 a.m. Ticket sales have been strong, and those interested in attending are advised to secure tickets promptly. The business

community has shown enthusiasm for the event, particularly in anticipation of hearing from Tom Barkin, President and CEO of the Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond.

Gratitude was extended to those who participated in the voting process for the Community Impact Awards. A total of six awards will be presented this year, with ongoing efforts to finalize videos, photographs, and stories before the event on April 10. The upcoming month is expected to be particularly busy.

Legislative Updates: The state legislature remains highly active, particularly with budget cuts and a record number of proposed bills. One key legislative item under close observation is the DECADE Act, which would significantly restructure the economic incentives provided by the State of Maryland for business attraction and retention. While a comprehensive discussion of the changes is beyond the scope of this meeting, a summary of the DECADE Act will be included in the follow-up email.

V. Town Reports

Town representatives reported on news from their jurisdiction.

- New construction projects in the Town of Easton include single-family houses, apartment complexes, and a 55+ development. Five businesses have opened in Easton, including The Market at Dover Station. Mr. Montgomery also reported that the town is experiencing substantial property tax revenue growth due to increased property assessments.

VI. Comments from Board Members and Guests

Board members and guests contributed to a robust discussion about events and issues around Talbot County. Highlights include:

- Mr. Kozel provided an update on Shore Regional Health, noting the system is on target for its FY25 budget. The Regional Medical Center Project is proceeding as planned, though weather delays occurred during the cold and rainy weather this winter. Mr. Kozel is confident the project team can make up the time and Route 662 will reopen on schedule. He also reported that Shore Regional Health is hiring international nurses to address workforce shortages in emergency departments and telemetry units.
- CBRE has been engaged to sell the hospital property in downtown Easton. The company is presently developing marketing materials. Mr. Kozel noted that the goal is to get the property sold by the end of the year, with a national search for interested developers starting soon. Community engagement will occur as offers are considered.
- Ms. Thomas reported that the Maryland Department of Labor is providing resources for displaced federal workers.
- The Chamber of Commerce plans to send out a call to action regarding the proposed legislation (HB1554, SB1045) on the sales and use tax on business services.
- Ms. Hayward compared the real estate market in 2023 to 2024, highlighting an 8.55% increase in the average home price and a 2.8% increase in the median home

price. The number of units sold increased from 506 to 568, indicating more sales and higher prices. It's too early to predict sales for 2025.

- Mr. Risher provided an update on the demolition of the Talbot County Business Center, which has started and will be noticeable.
- Easton High School is scheduling mock interviews and resume reviews for juniors and seniors on April 1, 2 and 4 between 8 a.m. and 2 p.m. Ms. Newman encouraged EDC members to assist if available.

VII. Final Remarks and Announcement of Upcoming Meetings

- March 13 – EDC Roundtable with Camoin Associates, Talbot County Free Library
- April 10 – Talbot County Business Appreciation Summit, Tidewater Inn
- 2025 EDC Meeting Dates – June 5, September 4, December 4

VIII. Adjournment

Mr. Kozel made a motion to adjourn the meeting; Mr. Montgomery seconded the motion. The meeting adjourned at approximately 8:59 a.m.