

Talbot County Tourism Board Meeting Minutes

November 13, 2024

Talbot County Free Library
100 West Dover Street, Easton, MD 21601

I. Welcome and Call to Order

Chairman Judy Bixler called the meeting to order at 8:33 a.m. and welcomed those attending the meeting in person. There was no virtual option.

Members Present: Jessica Bellis, Judy Bixler, Keasha Haythe, Harold Klinger, Patricia McGlannan, Mark Salter, Jeff Schneider

Members Absent: Chris Agharabi, Maureen Curry, Kristen Greenaway, Amy Kreiner, David Wojciechowski

Guests: Holly DeKarske, Tom Maglio

Staff: Cassandra Vanhooser, Kristen Goller

II. New Board Members

On the recommendation of the Tourism Board, the County Council recently appointed Chris Agharabi and Patricia McGlannan. Mr. Agharabi sends his apologies as he had a previously scheduled vacation planned.

Ms. Bixler introduced Patricia McGlannan, who was appointed by the Talbot County Council to represent Tilghman Island and the Bay Hundred. Members introduced themselves and offered a warm welcome. A native of Queen Anne's County, Ms. McGlannan and her husband John have owned the Tilghman Island Country Store since 2011.

She lived overseas for a number of years, was a relief worker in Romania, and started a nonprofit to adopt Romanian children when she came back to the states. Ms. McGlannan and her husband adopted one of these children, and she co-founded the Wye River Upper School to address the learning differences her child experienced. She and John are parents again to a nine-year-old boy who attends Tilghman Island Elementary School.

III. Approval of Minutes – September 25, 2024

Ms. Bixler presented the minutes from the September 25, 2024, meeting. Ms. Bellis made a motion to approve the minutes, and Mr. Klinger seconded the motion. The minutes were approved as written.

IV. Departmental Report

Typically, Ms. Vanhooser and Ms. Goller give reports on their work and upcoming initiatives. They suspended their normal procedure in favor of discussion on several important issues, including the Board request that the County Council support an increase in the accommodations tax rate from 4% to 6%.

Proposed Accommodation Tax Rate Increase: Though elected officials in Easton, Oxford, and St. Michaels have voted to support the increase, Ms. Vanhooser said that the proposal must still go before the County Council for a vote. The County Council requested that the Tourism Board hold a public meeting primarily for accommodations tax collectors to make sure that everyone had been informed of the proposed changes. This needs to be done before the issues is considered by the Council.

Ms. Vanhooser suggested that the public informational meeting take place on December 2 at the Talbot County Free Library and noted that the room has been booked. However, Ms. DeKarske said December 2 is a meeting night for the Easton Town Council, and Ms. Haythe voiced concerns that the Council already has several work sessions on December 3 and would not want back-to-back meeting nights. Ms. Vanhooser said the date has not been finalized or advertised, thus it would be easy to change. The group agreed that County Council attendance is important, and Ms. Vanhooser said she would confirm with the County Manager's Office.

Ms. Haythe also said that she preferred the issue to come before County Council for a vote before the December 10 meeting. Ms. Vanhooser agreed to visit with the County Manager about presenting to the Council before the public meeting in December.

Those in attendance agreed that the issue will face significant challenges if introduced at the State Legislature in the 2025 session. Ms. Bellis, who represented the Tourism Board at the County Council's meeting with the State Delegation meeting on October 1, reported that the District 37 senator and delegates expressed grave concerns about introducing a bill for a tax increase in a budget year as woefully bad as the one coming up. Ms. Haythe noted that Board members must reach out to members across the bridge to seek support if the Council requests that the State Delegation introduce a bill requesting an accommodations tax rate increase.

Ms. Bellis said that while the delegation seemed reluctant to support a tax rate increase, they seemed to have some appetite to introduce legislation that would shorten the amount of time lodging establishments have to pay their tax without a

significant penalty. Currently, those collecting and remitting the tax are charged a 1% per month penalty. At 120 days, the penalty is 10%. Many people pay their accommodations tax to Talbot County on day 119. Finance Director Martha Sparks recommended that the 10% penalty be imposed at 30 days. Ms. Vanhooser will reach out to Delegate Chris Adams to see if he has additional information from Wicomico County as he lives in and represents that county.

Ms. Vanhooser also distributed a draft of a survey that she intends to send to the county's lodging establishments. She noted that a short-term rental owner named Kevin Hartman had suggested the survey and had shared his own survey tool. Ms. Vanhooser sent Mr. Hartman's survey to John Hickman at BEACON who reviewed and suggested revisions to the survey. Specifically, Ms. Vanhooser removed a question about a proposed Visitors Center. She reported that many people are confused about the genesis of the tax increase request. It is not an effort to pay for a new visitors center, though the operating funds would come from the department's budget. The tax has not been raised since 2004, and Talbot County's is the lowest in the state of Maryland. Competitors are spending more and more money, as several have increased their accommodations tax rates to fund their tourism offices. Ms. Vanhooser and others are concerned that Talbot County is falling behind. The Tourism Board has recommended the increase four times since 2013. This is not about building a visitors center, Ms. Vanhooser stressed.

Board members reviewed and discussed the survey, making a number of suggestions on how to improve it. Mr. Schneider made a motion to send a survey to lodging properties that collect accommodations tax revenue; Ms. Bellis seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously.

Visitors Center Feasibility Study: Ms. Vanhooser reported that she and Ms. Goller hosted a public meeting to review the results of the Phase I research on October 30. Consultants John Hickman of BEACON and Ron Morgan of Becker Morgan Associates were on hand to present. Ms. Vanhooser noted that there seemed to be some confusion about the topic being discussed. Some people wanted to talk about the accommodations tax rate proposal and using it for a visitors center. Becker Morgan Associates will now produce conceptual drawings and a budget for a proposed visitors center to be located at the Talbot County Community Center, the site recommended in the report. Ms. Vanhooser will distribute the Phase I report and a QR code for a survey with the minutes. (See attached.)

Talbot County Economic Development and Tourism Strategic Plan: Ms. Vanhooser reported that the steering committee for the department's strategic plan is close to making a recommendation for a consultant to the County Council. She asked Board members to prepare to be actively involved in the process and reported that Ms. Bellis would be serving on the steering committee. Tourism is economic development, Ms. Vanhooser stated. This is an economic development plan, but tourism will be analyzed as an important industry sector in Talbot County. The strategic plan will be a major initiative for the department in 2025.

Talbot County Bike and Pedestrian Advisory Committee. The Talbot County Council is accepting nominations for a Bike and Pedestrian Advisory Committee. The application is on the TalbotCountyMD.gov website and is linked [here](https://www.talbotcountymd.gov/bikepedestrianadvisorycommittee). Ms. Vanhooser recommended that those who are interested should consider applying. <https://www.talbotcountymd.gov/bikepedestrianadvisorycommittee>

Maryland Department of Commerce Office of Tourism Award: Ms. Vanhooser announced that the Avalon Foundation and Talbot County together received the Transactional Opportunities Award for the 20th Annual Plein Air Art Festival and Competition. Ms. Bellis and her associate Ms. Nuthall joined Ms. Vanhooser and Ms. Goller at the Maryland Travel and Tourism Summit in Delcamp, Maryland, last week to accept the award. The Board offered congratulations.

Talbot County Business Appreciation Summit: Ms. Vanhooser reminded Board members that the department's annual Business Appreciation Summit is slated for April 2025, but nominations for the Community Impact Awards will be due before the end of the year. She asked Board members to consider what tourism-related businesses should be nominated. Ms. Vanhooser will share the nomination portal when it opens.

V. Town Reports

Town representatives reported on news and events taking place in their jurisdictions.

VI. Comments from Board Members

Board members shared insights on happenings in their businesses, nonprofits, or industries.

VII. Comments from the Public

Ms. DeKarske reported on happenings in the Town of Easton.

VIII. December Meeting

Ms. Bixler reminded members that the Tourism Board typically gathers for a December holiday party. Ms. Haythe said that she thinks it's particularly effective in networking with County Council members. Mr. Klinger made a motion stating that the Board should host a holiday gathering. Ms. Bellis seconded the motion, which passed unanimously. Ms. Vanhooser will seek an establishment willing to host.

IX. Upcoming Meetings

- Tourism Board Meeting, February 12
- Tourism Day in Annapolis, February 14
- National Travel and Tourism Week, May 4-10
- Tourism Board Meeting, May 14
- Tourism Board Meeting, September 10
- Tourism Board Meeting, November 12

X. Adjournment

Mr. Schneider made the motion to adjourn. Ms. Bellis seconded the motion. The meeting adjourned at approximately 9:27 a.m.

Addendum

Manager's Report Kristen Goller

Submitted November 13, 2024

Online and Print Collateral Review: Updates are in the works for www.TourTalbot.org. The department has contracted with ITI Digital, which utilizes Google Places to populate a calendar of events and business listings. The goal of this endeavor is to streamline operations and lessen the amount of staff time required to maintain website events and business listings. Staff is onboarding with ITI currently and plans to launch a new calendar of events in mid-December. The new business listings will launch in January. A new brochure for Tilghman Island has been drafted. The brochure will initially be posted online once it's finalized, with printed copies available in the spring. Through our partnership with Eastern Shore DMOs and heritage areas, a website for the Chesapeake Country All-American Road is in production with D3Corp and is on track to launch this winter.

Media Visits: Teresa Greco, a luxury travel writer visited Talbot County in October. This visit was coordinated through the Maryland Office of Tourism Development, as they are focusing on growing the Canadian market. On Thursday, November 14, Brand USA in partnership with Capital Region USA (CRUSA) is bringing 13 German, Swiss, and Austrian tour operators on a familiarization tour through Talbot County. They'll be visiting Eastern Shore Brewing, St. Michaels Winery, and Windon Distilling followed by a tour of the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum and a stop at Bonheur Pie & Ice Cream as they depart town.

M.D.M.O. and Legislative Update: Ms. Vanhooser and Ms. Goller attended the Maryland Tourism & Travel Summit November 6-8, which is hosted by the Maryland Tourism Coalition and supported by the Maryland Office of Tourism Development. As the legislative session nears, a joint flyer is being updated for distribution. This is used during the legislative session to highlight the return on investment brought to the state the investment in tourism marketing and development. The strategic plan for the Maryland Association of Destination Marketing Associations is moving forward with Hunden Partners, the selected vendor.