

Talbot County Tourism Board Meeting Minutes

February 12, 2025
Via Zoom Teleconferencing

I. Welcome and Call to Order

A February snow of 7-12 inches kept Tourism Board members at home. Chairman Judy Bixler called the meeting to order at 8:31 a.m. and welcomed those attending the meeting via Zoom.

Members Present: Chris Agharabi, Jessica Bellis, Judy Bixler, Kristen Greenaway, Patricia McGlannan, Mark Salter, Jeff Schneider, Katrina Whittington

Members Absent: Maureen Curry, Keasha Haythe, Harold Klinger, Amy Kreiner

Guests: Holly DeKarske, Angela Eade, Deena Kilmon, Tom Maglio

Staff: Cassandra Vanhooser, Kristen Goller

II. New Board Members

Captain Judy Bixler welcomed Katrina Whittington, the new representative for the Town of St. Michaels who also serves as a commissioner and is a member of the St. Michaels Tourism Committee. Chris Agharabi has also been appointed to the Tourism Board to represent the Bay Hundred and also attended his first meeting.

III. Approval of Minutes – November 13, 2024

Ms. Bixler presented the minutes from the November 13, 2024, meeting. Ms. McGlannan made a motion to approve the minutes, and Ms. Greenaway seconded the motion. The minutes were approved as written.

IV. Director's Report

Ms. Vanhooser began by stating her love for snow but noted that she was disappointed not to be able to meet in person for the first meeting of the year. Still, Kristen Goller, Judy Bixler, and Ms. Vanhooser agreed it was best to stick with our meeting schedule and move to Zoom because of the snow. She asked members to mark their calendars now for May 14 at 8:30 a.m., for a meeting at the Talbot County

Free Library. She also welcomed the new members and said she is looking forward to having their energy and enthusiasm on the board.

Christmas Lunch: Ms. Vanhooser started with a couple of thank yous to some Tourism Board members. Thank you to those who were able to join us at our Christmas lunch at Ava's Pizzeria and Wine Bar in St. Michaels. County Manager Clay Stamp joined the board for the meeting as did two members of the County Council – Pete Lesher and Lynn Mielke. She added a special thank you to Chris Agharabi for both joining and hosting us.

Accommodations Tax Rate Increase: Ms. Vanhooser also said thank you to those who stood arm-in-arm with the Tourism Board in solidarity for the ill-fate accommodations tax discussions. She was disappointed by the outcome and by the behavior of some members of the community, but Ms. Vanhooser stressed that she was never prouder to live and work in Talbot County as when members of the Tourism Board spoke publicly of their support, putting their time, talents, and good names on the line for the good of the industry. She believes we will see this issue resurface, but we will cross that bridge when we get to it.

Strategic Plan: Talbot County has awarded the bid for the departmental strategic plan to Camoin Associates, one of the country's premier economic development strategic planning firms. Their work has begun in earnest, and the first step is data analysis. One of the deliverables is an economic dashboard that will live on the TalbotWorks.org website and provide a source of information for the community.

The team has asked the consultants to look at tourism through the lens of economic development. Tourism is economic development, but economic development is not just tourism. The big questions that need to be analyzed include the following: opportunities to further develop our destination, gaps in what we offer now, and building the workforce that is the lifeblood of the tourism industry.

It will be an interesting discussion, and the Tourism Board is one of the industry groups they will interview. Focus groups will be held March 12-14. They will also be meeting one-on-one with each County Council member. Talbot County's five municipalities will be involved as we will host a series of public open houses around the county.

The strategic plan will inform the Talbot County comprehensive plan. Planning and Zoning has hired their consultant, and the comprehensive plan review process is just getting started. One of the deliverables for the economic development and tourism plan is a draft chapter for economic development and a draft chapter for tourism for the comp plan.

Of all the things the department will do this year, this is, in Ms. Vanhooser's opinion, the most important. She urged Tourism Board members to be part of the process.

Talbot County Visitors Center: A quick update on the Talbot County Visitors Center Feasibility Study. The department is expecting delivery of Phase II of the study sometime this month. Ms. Vanhooser checked in recently with Ron Morgan. The team has come up with some interesting ideas, but Ms. Goller is planning to include more about this in her report.

TourTalbot.org Website: Ms. Vanhooser stated that the department is gearing up to redevelop the TourTalbot.org website. She noted that those who have been long-time members know that a new website was one of the first projects Ms. Vanhooser launched after joining the department in 2013. The website Talbot County had was obsolete and had not been redesigned since it was first built. The days when you build it and forget it are long gone, she noted. For 12 years, someone on the tourism team has worked on the TourTalbot.org website every day. The website is still beautiful, functional, and dynamic, and it has grown with us and changed over the years. It is more than 400 pages. However, this website has outgrown the local web developer, and he has chosen to step aside to care for an ailing child, though he will continue with the Talbot Works website for now.

Talbot County Tourism needs a website designed by a team that understands destination marketing and someone who is constantly doing research and development to stay abreast of the latest developments. The department will pursue a grant to build this website that will take us into the future. For a reference point, development for a website such as TourTalbot.org costs \$70,000 to \$90,000 to build, and we are seeking grant opportunities to offset the cost of this website. Ms. Vanhooser and Ms. Goller will keep the Board posted on progress.

V. Manager's Report – Kristen Goller

Online and Print Collateral Review: The calendar of events on TourTalbot.org transitioned over to a new platform through ITI Digital starting in Dec. The goal in making this switch was to streamline procedures and lessen the amount of staff time dedicated to maintaining the calendar of events. Even with the learning curve of navigating a new system, staff time required to maintain the calendar has already decreased.

The ITI Digital system pulls events in for review and approval from Google and Facebook. However, the event's organizer must be set-up with a Google My Business profile and/or utilize Facebook Events, so the department may have some outreach to do in the coming months to ensure the system is capturing as many events as possible. The department is in the process of launching a similar module for the site's business listings. These are also pulled in via Google My Business.

The department also has developed a new brochure for Tilghman Island. It is available electronically currently, and a printed version will be available this spring. A re-print of the Frederick Douglass Driving Tour is scheduled for this spring.

Media Visits: Email inquiries are on the rise this winter, with recent photo requests coming from Travel + Leisure and Country Living. The Travel + Leisure photo request was for an article on St. Michaels that published this week. Earlier this month, Fyllis Hockman, who visited in 2024, published a new overview piece in Travelers United Plus. Sugar Buns Café was included in, “Taking Flight: Small Airports with Off-the-Radar Restaurants,” published on NextAvenue.

Talbot 250 Commission: The Talbot County Council passed a resolution to form a Talbot 250 commission, to coincide with the state’s Maryland 250 and national celebration. The department has applied to serve on this commission. To learn more about the commission or apply, visit talbot250.org. Self-nominations will be accepted until the end of February.

Chesapeake Bayways Destination Assessment: Talbot County was invited to participate in a Chesapeake Bayways Destination Assessment. This project, convened by Visit Annapolis & Anne Arundel County in partnership with the National Park Service Chesapeake Gateways and support from the Maryland Office of Tourism, was offered free of charge to participants.

A local team was assembled, which in addition to department staff included Judy Bixler, Holly DeKarske, Jill Ferris of the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum and LaDarian Blake, the Assistant Director of Recreation and Parks. In addition to advanced work, the team spent Jan. 28-30 at a workshop in Annapolis where experts in the field shared technical knowledge. Each team was then challenged to commit to a community-wide project.

The Talbot County team will develop a Master Planning Committee to further evaluate the need for a Talbot County Welcome Center. A feasibility study for a visitor center was completed in 2024, with favorable results recommending a location adjacent to the Talbot County Community Center and the new University of Maryland Regional Medical Center. Phase II is currently underway. Through discussions, the original concept evolved from a visitor center to a welcome center, which would serve the local community as well as visitors. The team will reconvene later this month to discuss the next steps.

MDMO and Legislative Update: Ms. Vanhooser and Ms. Goller will attend the Taste of the Eastern Shore legislative reception on Thursday, followed by Maryland Tourism Day on February 14. Several bills have been put forward with potential impacts on the tourism industry. While we are watching several, a few are listed below:

- HB0029 / SB0917: Electronic Payment Transactions - Interchange Fees - Calculation and Use of Data
- HB0087 / SB0132: Short-Term Rentals and Home Amenity Rentals - Taxation, Regulation, and Crimes; Hearing 3/11 at 1 p.m. Education, Energy, and the Environment

- HB0498 / SB0427 Economic Development - Delivering Economic Competitiveness and Advancing Development Efforts (DECADE) Act; Hearing 3/04 at 1 p.m. Ways and Means
- HB570 / SB803: Talbot County - Hotel Rental Tax - Time of Penalty for Nonpayment; Hearing 3/04 at 1 p.m. Budget and Taxation
- HB997 / SB324: Admissions and Amusement Tax - Food and Beverages; Hearing 2/24 at 11 a.m. House
- HB1005 / Income Tax - Tips or Gratuities - Subtraction Modification (No Income Taxes on Tips Act); Hearing 2/20 at 1 p.m. House
- HB1103 / SB979 – Local Government - Accommodations Intermediaries - Hotel Rental Tax Collection by Comptroller; Hearing 3/05, 1 p.m. Senate
- HB1327 / SB980: Natural Resources - Maryland Heritage Areas Authority - Funding and Grants; Hearing 3/04, 1 p.m. Budget and Taxation
- HB1400 / SB823: No Tax on Tips Act; Hearing 3/05 at 1 p.m. Finance
- HB1458 / SB809: Declaration of Rights – Right to Minimum Wage for Tipped Workers; Hearing 3/05 at 1 p.m. Finance

VI. Town Reports

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

VII. Comments from Board Members

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

VIII. Comments from the Public

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

IX. Upcoming Meetings

- 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

The meeting adjourned at 9:39 a.m.