

Talbot County Tourism Board
Meeting Minutes
September 25, 2024
Via Zoom

I. Welcome and Call to Order

Chairman Judy Bixler called the meeting to order at 8:30 a.m. and welcomed the members.

Members Present: Jessica Bellis, Judy Bixler, Angela Eade, Harold Klinger, Amy Kreiner, Jeff Schneider, and David Wojciechowski

Members Absent: Maureen Curry, Keasha Haythe, Kristen Greenaway, Mark Salter

Guests: Kevin Hartmann, Tom Maglio

Staff: Cassandra Vanhooser, Kristen Goller

II. Departing Board Members

Angela Eade popped into the meeting to give a fond farewell to the Tourism Board. She announced that she has retired and sold her business in Talbot County. Ms. Bixler thanked her for her years of tireless service.

III. New Board Members

Ms. Bixler welcomed David Wojciechowski. He is a newly elected commissioner in St. Michaels and is the new representative from the Town to the Tourism Board.

IV. Approval of Minutes – May 8, 2024

Ms. Bixler presented the minutes from the May 8, 2024, meeting. Ms. Bellis made a motion to approve the minutes, and Mr. Klinger seconded the motion. The minutes were approved unanimously.

V. Recommendation for New Members

Ms. Vanhooser reported that two board positions remain unfilled, both appointed to represent the Bay Hundred. She noted that she had spoken to several people and that two had emerged as possible candidates.

Chris Agharabi, owner of Ava's Pizzeria and Wine Bar and Theo's Steaks, Sides & Spirits in St. Michaels, has agreed to be considered to fill the position vacated by Michael Hoffmann when he left the Inn at Perry Cabin. Tilghman Island Country Store owner Patricia McGlannan agreed to be considered to fill the position vacated by Mary Kellogg representing Tilghman Island.

Ms. Vanhooser reviewed their qualifications. Ms. Bixler asked if anyone else had suggested candidates. Hearing none, she asked for a motion to recommend Mr. Agharabi and Ms. McGlannan to the County Council for appointments to the Board. Ms. Bellis made a motion to recommend both candidates as presented; the motion was seconded by Ms. Kreiner. The motion passed unanimously. Ms. Vanhooser will draft letters to send to the County Council.

VI. Manager's Report – Kristen Goller

Trappe Boundary Amendment for Stories of the Chesapeake: As a follow-up to our May meeting, both the Maryland Heritage Areas Authority and the Town of Trappe have approved the boundary amendment to add Trappe to the heritage area.

Online and Print Collateral Review: The new Talbot County Travel Guide is ready. The department worked with APG Media to sell advertising and print the guide. Our department oversaw the design, photography, and content. The team is in the process of rolling the guide out, distribution includes area hotels, the Easton Visitor Center, and the Chamber of Commerce. It is also distributed at official State of Maryland Welcome Centers and fulfillment requests from paid media are going strong. The department typically mails out over 10,000 guides per year. The guide is available digitally through the TourTalbot.org website. If you would like copies, please let me know, and the staff would be happy to get some to you. For the spring, the department is planning a larger rollout to kick off the travel season and plan to insert the guides in the *Washington Post*.

The county has fully absorbed TilghmanIsland.com, which was previously purchased. A new brochure design is in progress for Tilghman Island. Ms. Goller is assisting the Chesapeake Country All-American Road Alliance, as grant funding was secured to create a website for the road that will highlight attractions across the eastern shore.

Media Visits: Ms. Goller recently attended the Mid-Atlantic Public Relations Alliance annual Media Marketplace that was held in Roanoke, Virginia. This year's event afforded the opportunity to connect with 50 journalists and content creators who cover the Mid-Atlantic. Traditionally each destination brings promotional items to share with the journalists. The department partnered with Lyon Rum, which was well received.

Andrea Poe is covering haunted destinations for *The Washingtonian*. Talbot County Tourism hosted her for a stay at the Robert Morris Inn and connected her with Chesapeake Ghosts and the Tidewater Inn for additional stories. A German travel writer spent the day in St. Michaels this past weekend, seeing the maritime museum, riding the Patriot and dining at Ruse. The department is working with the Maryland Office of Tourism Development to finalize an itinerary for a Canadian luxury travel writer visiting in October and working through additional leads. Talbot Tourism has typically seen a peak in May and lower interest in the fall and winter, but now are having more consistent interest from the media.

MDMO and Legislative Update: Through our role in the Maryland Association of Destination Marketing Organizations (MDMO), Ms. Goller and Ms. Vanhooser will be attending a two-day meeting in October where DMOs will discuss legislative priorities for 2025. The organization has also secured grant funding to complete a strategic plan, and our office is leading the proposal and selection process.

VII. Director's Report – Cassandra M. Vanhooser

Ms. Vanhooser added her welcome to Mr. Wojciechowski and noted that the Board would need to take action on the two positions that became open July 1. Angela Eade has announced her retirement and does not wish to be reappointed, and Ian Fleming has sold his business and moved out of the county. She asked Board members to consider appropriate candidates.

Work Sessions and Major Initiatives: In May, Ms. Vanhooser outlined some initiatives that were on the horizon. The department has made progress on all three.

On July 9, the department hosted a work session on bike trails for the Talbot County Council. The purpose of this session was threefold. Council was asked to 1) Appoint an advisory committee to oversee work on trails and safety initiatives around the county; 2) Grant permission to apply for a Safe Streets for All grant for developing a bike and pedestrian master plan for the county; and 3) Grant permission to work with MDOT and DNR on a plan for the Frederick Douglass Rail Trail.

The Talbot County Council has introduced an administrative resolution to create the Bike and Pedestrian Advisory Committee that will look at these issues comprehensively across the county. MDOT was in Easton in September to announce its Statewide Transportation Trails Plan Kick Off. Look for more to come on this issue.

Ms. Vanhooser reminded the Tourism Board that the department is working to hire a consultant for a Strategic Plan. The department released a RFP the first week in August, held a Q&A session on August 19, and received five bids on September 10. This strategic plan will set the course for the next 5 to 10 years for this department. There will be plenty of opportunities to engage along the way, like you're doing today, but if you want to be on the committee, email Ms. Vanhooser.

Another issue that gathered steam over the summer was a possible Public Accommodations Tax rate increase. On August 25, the department hosted another work session with the Talbot County Council where Harold Klinger, former owner of Harbortowne Resort, and Ms. Vanhooser along with Martha Sparks discussed a proposal from the Tourism Board that the County raise the Accommodations Tax from 4%, the lowest in the state, to 6%.

The Council seems amenable to an increase, but they have asked the Board to seek input from each of the towns. Ms. Vanhooser presented to Easton, Oxford, and St. Michaels, and all voted to support. She laid out the timeline for passing legislation and noted that the County Council meets with the State Delegation to discuss the issue on October 1.

Ms. Vanhooser asked that the Tourism Board vote again in a roll call vote to support pursuing an increase. She reminded the Board that they voted previously by email, but she felt it was important to make sure the issue has support. Ms. Bixler opened the floor for a motion. Mr. Schneider made a motion to support asking the County Council to raise the accommodations tax from 4% to 6%. Mr. Klinger seconded the motion. Jessica Bellis, aye; Harold Klinger, aye; Amy Kreiner, aye; Jeff Schneider, aye; and David Wojciechowski, aye. Ms. Bixler, as the chairman, cannot vote. Ms. Eade had already left the meeting.

Tourism Numbers: Ms. Vanhooser reviewed the most recent economic impact study from Tourism Economics and the Maryland Office of Tourism Development for CY 2023. Talbot County's visitor volume was down by 2% and spending was down 2.4%. Tourism still makes up 15.2% of the county's total employment and 13.8% of the labor income.

Bylaws Update: Ms. Vanhooser said that the bylaws need to be updated. She, Ms. Bixler, and Ms. Bellis are working on edits.

Dates to Remember: Ms. Vanhooser reminded members of important dates that are coming up.

- ✓ November 5 is Election Day; county offices are closed.
- ✓ The Maryland Tourism & Travel Summit will be held in Harford County November 6-8. Ms. Vanhooser and Ms. Goller will attend. If you are interested in attending, please call for more information.
- ✓ The department partners with the Waterfowl Festival and The Arc Central Chesapeake Region to host a business breakfast at Waterfowl Festival on November 8. Please RSVP at TalbotWorks.org if you plan to attend.
- ✓ The next Tourism Board meeting will be held November 13.

PowerPoint Presentation is attached.

VIII. Town Reports

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

IX. Comments from Board Members

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

X. Comments from the Public

Mr. Maglio reported on activities in the town of Easton.

XI. Upcoming Meetings

- Maryland Tourism and Travel Summit, November 6-8
- Waterfowl Breakfast, November 8
- Tourism Board Meeting, November 13

XII. Adjournment

Mr. Schneider made the motion to adjourn. Ms. Kreiner seconded the motion. The meeting adjourned at approximately 9:15 a.m.