

# **Talbot County Tourism Board Meeting Minutes**

**May 14, 2025**

Talbot County Free Library

## **I. Welcome and Call to Order**

Chairman Judy Bixler called the meeting to order at 8:30 a.m. and welcomed members and guests to the Talbot County Free Library for the first in-person meeting of the year.

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

**Members Absent:** Maureen Curry, Keasha Haythe,

**Guests:** Holly DeKarske, Sarah Kilmon, Tom Maglio, Sammie Mooney

**Staff:** Cassandra Vanhooser, Kristen Goller

## **II. Approval of Minutes – February 12, 2025**

Ms. Bixler presented the minutes from the February 12, 2024, meeting. Mr. Schneider made a motion to approve the minutes, and Ms. Kreiner seconded the motion. The minutes were approved as written.

## **III. Presentation – Welcome Center Feasibility Study and Conceptual Drawings**

Becker Morgan Group and BEACON at Salisbury University presented work to date on the feasibility study for the proposed Talbot County Welcome Center, including Phase I research and Phase II conceptual drawings. Ron Morgan of Becker Morgan introduced Craig Williams, project architect, and Jessica Iacona from BEACON who presented.

Ms. Iacona began by summarizing the Phase I findings, which included a review of 44 regional welcome centers, interviews with stakeholders, and traffic analysis. The study found that travelers, particularly millennials, value in-person interactions supplemented with digital resources. The team also identified safety concerns with visitors currently seeking information inside the Talbot County Community Center, especially when children's programs are underway.

Mr. Williams then presented conceptual designs for a 13,000-square-foot facility. The concept included a 6,000-square-foot multipurpose space for events, a visitor welcome area, exhibit space, offices, storage, and catering facilities. Outdoor amenities such as walking trails, a yoga pavilion, and connections to the adjacent medical and community centers were proposed.

Board members raised questions about the practicality of some design features, including curved walls in the exhibit space, the extensive use of glass, and the impact on HVAC costs. They also discussed event capacity, restroom requirements, and whether the facility would compete with or complement existing hotel meeting spaces. Parking, staffing, and operating costs were identified as considerations for future planning.

The conversation highlighted the need to frame the Welcome Center as a community-first project with tourism benefits. Ms. Vanhooser emphasized that these renderings represent a vision for what could be built, not a final design, and future phases will refine the plan and include a business model.

#### **IV. Director's Report**

Ms. Vanhooser provided a comprehensive review of departmental activities and strategic priorities (see attached presentation). She explained the role of the Tourism Office as the official Destination Marketing Organization for Talbot County and outlined its core marketing strategies across owned, earned, and paid media.

TourTalbot.org remains the county's primary digital presence and will undergo a major redesign later this year, funded by an EDA grant. Ms. Vanhooser shared that the next travel guide is in development and provided updates on the Frederick Douglass Park on the Tuckahoe project, the Talbot 250 Commission, and participation in regional and statewide tourism initiatives.

She noted that tourism continues to play a critical role in Talbot County's economy, generating \$317.4 million in spending in 2023, supporting nearly 2,000 direct jobs, and contributing \$132 million in taxes. Ms. Vanhooser also emphasized that future efforts will focus on data-driven marketing, strategic partnerships, and enhancements to visitor experience.

#### **V. Recommendations for New Board Members**

Ms. Vanhooser noted that the board has two positions open: one representing short-term rentals to complete Angela Eade's term and the other for B&Bs to complete Ian Fleming's term. Both Ms. Eade and Mr. Fleming have moved out of the county and are pursuing other professional pursuits.

Two candidates have emerged for the short-term rental position. Ms. Vanhooser presented a letter from Kathleen Schammel received by the Talbot County Council. The other candidates, Jennifer and Emma Brown, were recommended at a previous meeting by Tourism Board member Patricia McGlannan. Jessica Bellis, Jeff Schneider, and Chris Agharabi agreed to interview candidates and report back to the board at the September meeting.

Eric Levinson, owner of the Hummingbird Inn in Easton, was also recommended at a previous meeting for the B&B position. Ms. Vanhooser reported that she contacted Mr. Levinson, who expressed his willingness to serve and his excitement for the position. Mr. Schneider made a motion to recommend Mr. Levinson to the Talbot County Council. The motion was seconded by Mr. Klinger and passed unanimously. Ms. Vanhooser will write a letter of recommendation from the board to the County Council recommending Mr. Levinson.

## **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**

- Tourism Board Meeting, September 10
- Tourism Board Meeting, November 12

## **X. Adjournment**

The meeting adjourned at 9:59 a.m.