

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 8:33 a.m. and welcomed members and guests to the Talbot County Free Library.

Members Present: Chris Agharabi, Jessica Bellis, Judy Bixler, Patricia McGlannan, Eric Levinson, Mark Salter, and Jeff Schneider

Members Absent: Maureen Curry, Kristen Greenaway, Keasha Haythe, Harold Klinger, Amy Kreiner, Katrina Whittington

Guests: Holly DeKarske, Sammie Mooney

Staff: Cassandra Vanhooser, Kristen Goller

II. Approval of Minutes – May 14, 2025

Ms. Bixler presented the minutes from the May 14, 2025, meeting. Approval was delayed until a quorum was present. As soon as a quorum was present, Ms. Bixler ask for a motion to approve the May minutes. Mr. Schneider made a motion to approve the minutes, and Ms. McGlannan seconded the motion. The minutes were approved unanimously as written.

III. Welcome New Board Member Eric Levinson

Ms. Bixler introduced new board member Eric Levinson, owner and chef of Hummingbird Inn in Easton. Mr. Levinson shared information about his background before attendees when around the room to introduce themselves. (Letter of recommendation attached.)

IV. Manager's Report – Kristen Goller

Online Content Strategy: Ms. Goller shared that since the last meeting ITI Digital's business and event listing modules have been fully integrated into the website. This undertaking has streamlined processes and allows staff to divert time to other projects. Staff have completed onboarding with CrowdRiff, which Ms. Goller explained allows the department to source, manage, and publish user-generated images and short-form video. An image digitization project was completed. All images are now stored in a cloud-based system.

The department has received a grant for the redesign of TourTalbot.org for which a contract has been signed. The project is now fully underway. The project came in under budget, so the scope has been expanded to include a redesign of TalbotWorks.org, the economic development-focused site. An accessibility audit, which will allow the department to better relay content geared towards the ADA community, will be completed this fall/winter. This work is fully funded through a grant from a non-compete grant from the U.S. Department of Commerce Economic Development Administration (EDA) that was distributed through the Maryland Office of Tourism.

Media Visits: The department continues to field media inquiries. A sampling of coverage over the summer included *Bethesda Magazine*, the German-based *Reisen Exclusiv*, *Chesapeake Bay Journal*, *Washingtonian*, *ConventionSouth*, and *When in Your State*. Ms. Goller attended the Mid-Atlantic Public Relations Alliance (MATPRA) annual Media Marketplace in Reading, PA from Sept. 12-14, 2025. This year's event afforded the opportunity to connect with more than 50 journalists and content creators who cover the Mid-Atlantic region. While many different pitches were made, the media seemed particularly interested in Poplar Island, fishing and hunting, blue catfish, Talbot250, log canoe racing, the Oxford-Bellevue Ferry, and the Chesapeake Country All-American Road.

Today, a photography crew is visiting Talbot County and will capture images in St. Michaels and Easton for a new campaign on behalf of the Maryland Office of Tourism.

Projects and Events: The Talbot County Council has appointed Ms. Goller as an administrative liaison to the Talbot250 Commission. Next year, Talbot County will also be commemorating its 365th anniversary, so there is much to recognize.

Through the county's involvement in Team Maryland, which falls under the umbrella of Maryland Sports and the Maryland Stadium Authority, the department is pursuing an opportunity to complete a facilities assessment by The Collective Best. Several other counties have gone through this process. As the last Talbot County evaluation was completed more than a decade ago, an updated analysis could prove useful. We expect a report to be delivered this fall.

The department was excited to support Discover Easton's bid for the Maryland Main Street Conference, which was awarded for this Oct. 7-8. The department is sponsoring the event and dedicating time to volunteering. The department has submitted a bid to host the Maryland Motorcoach Group Travel Leader Showcase in Fall 2026 and negotiations are ongoing with the organizer. Ms. Goller will attend this year's showcase in Gettysburg, PA later this month.

MDMO and Legislative Update: Ms. Vanhooser and Ms. Goller are continuing to monitor the legislative climate over the summer. The Maryland Office of Tourism Development

Budget was cut \$3.1 million during last year's budget cycle, which will impact the level of advertising the state's tourism office is able to accomplish. We are staying in tune with staff at the state level to see how these cuts will be made.

V. Director's Report – Cassandra Vanhooser

Ms. Vanhooser continued the conversation regarding the upcoming legislative session. It's her understanding that Talbot County plans to hire a lobbyist. Ms. Vanhooser noted that both she and Ms. Goller are active at the state level, with both having leadership roles in the Maryland Association of Destination Marketing Organizations (MDMO).

In the last legislative session, legislation passed related to the short-term rental industry. Beginning in 2027, the state will now collect local lodging tax from short-term rental platforms such as AirBnB and VRBO and distribute it back to the counties. This is a major change, and the Talbot County Finance Office is working closely with the state to monitor the implementation plan. In this same legislation, Talbot County's late payment penalty period was lowered from 120 to 30 days. Discussion ensued.

Shifting gears to the department's online presence, Ms. Vanhooser reiterated that the website redesign project was fully funded through an Economic Development Administration (EDA) grant that came to Talbot County through a non-compete grant administered by the state. The redesign of both sites is necessary because the department's long-time web developer gave notice in the spring and is no longer able to work on TourTalbot.org and TalbotWorks.org because of personal issues.

Ms. Vanhooser thanked those that attended the strategic plan focus group with Camoin Associates. Comments made were important for Camoin to hear, and feedback is being utilized to continue forward with a draft. Camoin Associates will make a joint presentation to the Tourism Board and Economic Development Commission this fall. An invitation will be forthcoming. The strategic plan was made possible with funding through the Maryland Rural Economic Development fund and is required to be completed by the end of 2025.

In addition to this presentation, invites will be shared for upcoming events:

- Tuesday, Sept. 30 at 4 p.m.
Talbot County Council Work Session: Welcome Center Feasibility
- Tuesday, Oct. 28 at 4 p.m.
Talbot County Council Work Session: Frederick Douglass Park on the Tuckahoe Plan Overview

- Friday, Nov. 14 at 8:30 a.m.
Waterfowl Festival Business Appreciation Breakfast
- TBD in December
Talbot County Council Work Session: Camoin Associates Strategic Plan Presentation

The department has received a small planning grant of \$5,000 through the Stories of the Chesapeake Heritage Area to create a conceptual design for the current visitor display at Easton Airport. This space currently serves as a distribution point for brochures and collateral, including the Talbot County Travel Guide.

The county had strong representation at the Maryland Association of County Organizations (MACO) summer conference. This year's theme was superheroes. Talbot County recognized Chesapeake Bay waterman as the superheroes of the Chesapeake Bay. Jay Flemming photographed real men and women from the industry and life-size cutouts were created for photo opportunities. These images will be used in the future, as there are plans to continue and expand on the story of our watermen.

Lastly, Ms. Vanhooser shared Talbot County's numbers that were included as a part of the state's annual economic report, created by Tourism Economics, and questions were fielded. (Talbot County report attached.)

VI. Town Reports

Town representatives reported on news and events taking place in their jurisdictions. Board members shared insights on happenings in their businesses, nonprofits, or industries. Ms. McGlannan reported positive news from Tilghman Island. Both she and Ms. Bellis noted how strong Plein Air events on the island were this year. Ms. Bellis noted that overall, Plein Air Easton had a tremendous year. They are using the success and momentum generated from this year to think creatively on how to enhance the event moving forward.

Ms. Bixler reported that Oxford is in a phase of transition. The ferry is back up and running, but the Robert Morris Inn is for sale. She is uncertain whether renovations at the Oxford Inn are moving forward. Mr. Agharabi reported on St. Michaels. The town is consolidating tourism-facing websites. They have contracted with both Placer.AI and ITI Digital and are onboarding now. Ms. Bellis reported that renovations to the third floor of the Avalon are nearing completion. She invited the board to hold their November meeting in the new space. Ms. Dekarske noted that the Easton Visitor Center renovations are nearing completion and provided an overview of upcoming events.

VII. Comments from Board Members

Ms. Bellis and Mr. Schneider updated members on interviews they conducted with two potential board members to represent the short-term rental industry. The committee interviewed both M. Kathleen Schamel, who applied to the Talbot County Council, and Jennifer Brown, who was nominated by Ms. McGlannan. While both candidates are experience within the industry, the pair recommended Jennifer Brown for consideration. Through discussion, it was shared that Ms. Schamel's interest focuses on advocating for the short-term rental industry as it relates to legislation and regulations. This has not been the role of the Tourism Board, as short-term rentals are licensed and regulated under Talbot County Planning and Zoning.

The committee noted that Ms. Brown brings more of a tourism mentality to the conversation, and she manages significantly more short-term rental properties. Ms. Bellis made a motion that the board recommend that the Tourism Board recommend Jennifer Brown to the Talbot County Council to represent short-term rentals. This was seconded by Ms. McGlannan. Ms. Bixler opened the floor for discussion followed by a vote by roll call. The motion passed 5-0-1, with Mr. Agharabi abstaining.

Ms. Vanhooser reminded the group that while the Tourism Board has always been afforded the courtesy of making a recommendation, appointments are ultimately left to the County Council. Ms. Vanhooser will draft a summary of the board's recommendation to share with Councilwoman Keasha Haythe, the Council's liaison to the Tourism Board.

VIII. Comments from the Public

No comments.

IX. Upcoming Meetings

- Talbot County Council Work Session for Welcome Center Feasibility Study - September 30
- Talbot County Council Work Session for Overview of the Frederick Douglass Park on the Tuckahoe Phase II Pre-Development, Engineering, and Interpretation Project – October 28
- Tourism Board Meeting, November 12
- Waterfowl Festival Business Appreciation Breakfast – November 14
- December Holiday Gathering TBD

X. Adjournment

The meeting adjourned at 10:23 a.m. after a motion was made by Ms. McGlannan and seconded by Mr. Salter.