

Talbot County Tourism Board

Meeting Minutes

Nov. 13, 2025

Avalon Theatre

I. Welcome and Call to Order

Chairman Judy Bixler called the meeting to order at 8:31 a.m. and welcomed members and guests. Ms. Bellis provided a welcome on behalf of the Avalon Foundation and shared details on the theatre and its newly renovated meeting space.

Members Present: Chris Agharabi, Jessica Bellis, Judy Bixler, Kristen Greenaway, Keasha Haythe, Harold Klinger, Patricia McGlannan, Eric Levinson, Mark Salter, and Jeff Schneider

Members Absent: Maureen Curry, Amy Kreiner, Katrina Whittington

Guests: N/A

Staff: Cassandra Vanhooser, Kristen Goller

II. Approval of Minutes – September 10, 2025

Ms. Bixler presented the minutes from the September 10, 2025, meeting. Ms. Bellis made a motion to approve the minutes, and Mr. Schneider seconded the motion. The minutes were approved as written.

III. Talbot County Economic Development and Tourism Strategic Plan Approval

Ms. Vanhooser outlined the strategic plan, recognizing that the project was funded by the Rural Economic Development Fund. She thanked those board members who attended last week's joint presentation by Camoin. Each board member also received the full plan electronically.

Ms. Haythe noted that the plan is tentatively scheduled to go before Council in January. It is important for the council to approve the plan, as the previous plan was only partially adopted. Mr. Agharabi asked the board to consider adding marketing for workforce recruitment, and he will send that recommendation in writing. Ms. Haythe recommended that a cost to implement and the Return on Investment if implemented be added. She believes the department could do more if additional budget was allocated. Mr. Klinger suggested implementation figures be completed but that they remain separate from the plan.

Pending no significant changes during the remaining review process, Ms. Bellis made a motion to approve the visionary, living, and practical strategic plan. Ms. Kinger seconded the motion. Mr. Schneider suggested that the plan's 5-10-year timeline be recognized when presented to council. The motion passed unanimously. As a next step, Ms. Haythe recommended a robust marketing plan be developed for the economic development side for business attraction and workforce development. Ms. Bixler and Ms. Bellis recognized Ms. Vanhooser for the work undertaken during the strategic planning process, along with that of her staff.

IV. Manager's Report – Kristen Goller

Online Content Strategy: At our last meeting, it was announced that grants funds (secured through the Economic Development Association) were funding the development of a new website for TourTalbot.org and TalbotWorks.org. On Oct. 28 TourTalbot.org successfully launched. While the website is live, we will continue to make tweaks over the coming months. The launch was just in time to transition focus to fall events such as Waterfowl Festival and holiday activities. The TalbotWorks.org website is now in development and will launch over the winter.

Plans are still in motion to move forward with an accessibility audit, which will allow us to better relay content geared towards the ADA community. A grant application was submitted to the Stories of the Chesapeake Heritage Area to offset costs to refresh the department's image library in 2026.

Print Collateral

Shifting over to print collateral, plans are commencing for the development of the next Talbot County Travel Guide. The department worked with APG Media to sell advertising and print the 2025/25 guide. A renewal clause was included in that contract, and the Talbot County Council just approved moving forward with a renewal.

Media Visits:

The department continues to field media inquiries and track media mentions. A compilation of coverage received, some of which was secured by the public relations efforts of local partners such as Lyon Rum, Inn at Perry Cabin, etc. includes: HGTV, Preferred Magazine, Delaware Online, Travel and Tour World, eater, On Better Living, Eye on Annapolis, Philadelphia Inquirer, Baltimore Sun, USA Today 10 Best, National Geographic, and Secret DC.

Ms. Goller has continued to engage media met at the Mid Atlantic Public Relations Alliance (MATPRA) annual Media Marketplace in Sept. Through preliminary efforts,

the area's oyster offerings received a nod in Megan DeMatteo's piece, "Maryland's Wild Oyster Season is Back – Here's What to Eat, Drink, and Celebrate on the Bay." An article in Game and Fish Magazine's winter edition is forthcoming by Ken Perrotte. Writers Joelle Machis and Ryan Slough recently visited in partnership with the Maryland Office of Tourism Development and explored Tilghman Island, St. Michaels, Oxford and Easton. Thank you to the many partners that supported this visit, including the Avalon and Oxford-Bellevue Ferry.

In the Spring, the County has invited the public relations staff from the Maryland Office of Tourism Development to take part in a Familiarization tour. The 2026 MATPRA Media Marketplace will be held in Delaware, which brings opportunity to host small groups of attending media on a tour as well.

Projects and Events:

Chesapeake Country All-American Road, ABA Partnership, and Stories of the Chesapeake Heritage Area: The Chesapeake Country All-American Road, for which Ms. Goller serves as the vice-chair of the alliance, has launched a website: www.ccaar.org. The group is now working on enhancing its physical presence.

The nine Eastern Shore counties have formalized their continued partnership to collectively promote the region at the American Bus Association Marketplace, which will be held in Las Vegas in 2026.

The Stories of the Chesapeake Heritage Area is readying new recipe cards and a cookbook. The new cards will focus on Maryland250 and Early Innovators, so Talbot County has provided content on Tench Tilghman as well as Coulbourne & Jewett. The cookbook is focusing on local markets, so we'll be sourcing additional recipes in the coming months.

MDMO and Legislative Update:

Ms. Vanhooser and Ms. Goller are continuing to monitor the legislative climate both at the county level and through their role in the Maryland Association of Destination Marketing Organizations (MDMO). Talbot County has contracted its own lobbyists for this session. Mike Mason from Providence Strategies already represents MDMO and has now taken Talbot County on as a client.

V. Director's Report – Cassandra Vanhooser

Talbot County Welcome Center Feasibility Study: The Talbot County Council held a work session on September 29 to review findings from Becker Morgan from the Phase II Welcome Center feasibility. After the New Year, staff will convene a meeting of a planning committee supporting this project, which includes a representative

from the University of Maryland Regional Medical Center, the Talbot County Community Center, CBMM, and the Town of Easton.

While this option is explored further as a long-term opportunity, in the short term, the department is utilizing grant funds awarded by the Stories of the Chesapeake Heritage Area to reimagine and enhance its current display offerings at Easton Airport. The airport is undergoing renovations after the closing of Sugar Buns, so the timing aligns well. Becker Morgan will assist with this project as well.

Each of these initiatives builds on the foundation established in our strategic plan. Together, they represent our commitment to thoughtful growth, storytelling excellence, and the enduring vitality of Talbot County's tourism economy.

Waterfowl Festival and Maryland Heritage Tourism Summit

Friday afternoon, the Maryland Heritage Tourism Summit & Business Expo is scheduled from 1-5 p.m. The free event will take place at the American Legion Post #77 and is hosted by Lou Fields, President, Baltimore African American Tourism Council, Inc. Based in Baltimore, Mr. Fields is well known within the industry so while the timing is not ideal, Talbot County is lending him technical support for his event and welcome you to attend.

Ms. Vanhooser also invited Board members to attend the Waterfowl Festival Community Impact Breakfast on Friday, Nov. from 8:30 a.m. to 10 a.m. hosted by the Waterfowl Festival and Fello in partnership with our department. Throughout the weekend, the Easton Visitor Center is hosting displays by our department, Talbot 250, Maryland250, and the Stories of the Chesapeake Heritage Area in their newly remodeled space.

VI. Town Reports

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

VII. Comments from Board Members

Board members discussed the upcoming Waterfowl Festival and anecdotally shared that the attendance seems larger, and the length of stay is extending. The annual holiday gathering for the board will take place at the Hummingbird Inn this year, with a date announced soon.

VIII. Comments from the Public

No comments.

IX. Upcoming Meetings

- December Holiday Gathering – Hummingbird Inn

X. Adjournment

The meeting adjourned at 10:23 a.m.