

Talbot County Tourism Board

Meeting Minutes

Feb. 11, 2026

Zoom Meeting

I. Welcome and Call to Order

Chairman Judy Bixler called the meeting to order at 8:31 a.m. and welcomed members and guests. She thanked those that were able to attend the December Holiday Gathering and noted her appreciation of Eric Levinson, owner of Hummingbird Inn, for hosting.

Members Present: Chris Agharabi, Jessica Bellis, Judy Bixler, Keasha Haythe, Amy Kreiner, Mark Salter, and Jeff Schneider

Members Absent: Maureen Curry, Kristen Greenaway, Harold Klinger, Eric Levinson, Patricia McGlannan, Katrina Whittington

Guests: Holly DeKarske, Deena Kilmon, Michael Meier

Staff: Cassandra Vanhooser, Kristen Goller

II. Approval of Minutes – Nov. 13, 2025

Ms. Bixler presented the minutes from the Nov. 13, 2025, meeting. However, a quorum was not present, so the minutes were not approved.

III. Talbot County Council Report – Keasha Haythe

Ms. Haythe announced that the County's annual report was presented at last night's council meeting. The report highlights major undertakings by the County and staff during 2025, and it will be available online for viewing. While many other jurisdictions produce this type of report, until now, Talbot County has not done so. Ms. Haythe sees this as a step forward, which was made possible by the addition of a Public Information Officer to County staff.

Ms. Haythe is looking forward to the Feb. 24 work session on the Economic Development and Tourism strategic plan. Council has received the plan, and she looks forward to the discussion.

Talbot County also has contracted a lobbyist for the first time. Michael Mason from Providence Strategies, LLC provides weekly reports to the County Council. The reports occur via Zoom every Thursday at 4:30 p.m., and they are open to the public. Ms. Haythe also serves as Talbot County's Maryland Association of Counties (MACo) legislative liaison.

IV. Director's Report – Cassandra Vanhooser

Ms. Vanhooser shared a report produced by the Maryland Association of Destination Marketing Organizations and Gray Research Solutions, which outlines the positive impacts of the tourism industry on Maryland's economy. Ms. Vanhooser also briefed the Tourism Board on upcoming engagement opportunities.

Talbot County Council Work Session: Talbot County Economic Development and Tourism Strategic Plan

February 24, 2:30 p.m., Bradley Meeting Room

This work session with the Talbot County Council will focus on the Talbot County Economic Development and Tourism Strategic Plan and its priorities for the coming years. Tourism Board members are encouraged to attend and engage, demonstrating support for the plan's tourism-related strategies and helping reinforce the importance of destination development, placemaking, and the visitor economy in the County's long-term economic vision.

Board Role: Attend and support.

Maryland Department of Commerce Secretary Visit - March 3

TBD; Invitation Only

The visit by Harry Coker, Jr., Secretary of the Maryland Department of Commerce, provides an opportunity to showcase the best of Talbot County through a curated series of business visits including (at his request) tourism, the arts, and key economic development initiatives. The itinerary will feature select local businesses.

Board Role: Participate as local leadership supporting tourism-driven investment and priority projects where invited.

Talbot Works Business Academy

March 17, via Zoom

Now in its fourth cohort, the Talbot Works Business Academy is Talbot County's flagship small business development program, designed to support local entrepreneurs and second-stage businesses through practical training, peer learning, and access to capital.

Led by Talbot County Economic Development and Tourism, the Academy equips participants with tools to strengthen operations, plan for growth, and increase resilience, culminating in a capstone presentation and graduation before the Talbot County Council that highlights each business's progress, challenges, and plans for continued investment in Talbot County.

Board Role: Sign up to judge final presentations on March 17 from 5:45 p.m.-8 p.m.

Mark Perna Visit and CTE Open Houses **April 13–14, TBD**

Nationally recognized workforce and education speaker Mark Perna will visit Talbot County to speak at Easton High School and St. Michaels High School, addressing students, educators, administrators, and parents. Each visit will include a Career and Technical Education Open House prior to the presentation. Tourism Board members are encouraged to **attend and engage**, reinforcing the long-term connection between education, workforce readiness, and the sustainability of Talbot County's visitor economy and service sectors.

Board Role: Attend as community leaders and advocates for workforce pipelines that support the visitor economy.

National Travel and Tourism Week **May 3-9**

This national observance offers a platform to spotlight Talbot County's tourism assets, celebrate the local workforce that supports the visitor economy, and share clear, data-driven messages about tourism's economic impact. Board members are encouraged to **amplify** these messages locally and statewide, reinforcing tourism's role in supporting jobs, small businesses, and community vitality.

Board Role: Amplify tourism impact messaging and help celebrate the local workforce behind the visitor economy.

Business Appreciation Summit **May 14, 8 a.m.**

Now in its 19th year, the Talbot County Business Appreciation Summit is the County's signature event celebrating the strength, resilience, and leadership of the local business community. Hosted by Talbot County Economic Development and Tourism, the Summit brings together business owners, employers, nonprofit leaders, educators, and public partners to recognize community impact through the Community Impact Awards and to hear a forward-looking keynote from Dr. Dell Gines on how innovation, artificial intelligence, and emerging economic trends are shaping the future of local economies and quality of place.

Board Role: As part of this celebration of the business community, tourism leaders are invited to attend as visible representatives of the visitor economy to engage with local employers and support the event.

V. Manager's Report – Kristen Goller

Online Content Strategy: Work on the new TourTalbot.org, which successfully launched in the fall, continues to further elevate the site. In addition to optimizing

for SEO (search engine optimization), a recent AI audit of the site will help ensure our content is recognizable to large language models (LLMs) such as ChatGPT and Gemini. The TalbotWorks.org website is in the final phase of development. While plans are still in motion to move forward with an accessibility audit, we've paused as new Federal legislation has passed regarding online ADA access for government bodies. We are working with the County's public information officer to ensure that all County sites are compliant by the April 2027 deadline. A small grant application to the Stories of the Chesapeake Heritage Area was approved, which will provide funds to offset costs to refresh the department's image library.

Print Collateral: Shifting over to print collateral, plans are commencing for the development of the next Talbot County Travel Guide. The department will again work with APG Media to sell advertising and print the guide.

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 Bluepoint Hospitality, Inn at Perry Cabin, etc. includes: Axios DC, Baltimore Sun, Chesapeake Bay Magazine, Fox 5 DC, Local Palate, MSN.com, Southern Living, US News & World Report, Washington Post, Washingtonian, and What's Up Media.

Ms. Goller has continued to engage media met at the Mid Atlantic Public Relations Alliance (MATPRA) annual Media Marketplace in Sept. So far, these efforts have resulted in pieces in the Frederick News Post and Game and Fish Magazine. An article is forthcoming in Garden & Gun Magazine focused on the Oxford-Bellevue Ferry, and a new piece is in the works for Military Magazine.

Projects and Events:

Welcome Center: 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. Becker Morgan was contracted to assist, and preliminary meetings have been held.

Chesapeake Country All-American Road, ABA Partnership, and Stories of the Chesapeake Heritage Area: Ms. Goller was named chairperson of the Chesapeake Country All-American Road alliance. In 2026, the alliance is using grant funds to produce promotional videos for the byway, and an RFP is out for the design and fabrication of byway hubs.

The nine Eastern Shore counties continued to partner to send a representative to the American Bus Association Marketplace in January. Preliminary feedback from the representative has been positive.

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.

Upcoming Events: The Talbot250 commission, where Ms. Goller serves as a staff administrator is a partner in hosting a Native American Heritage & Artifact Day. The event, hosted at the Waterfowl Festival building, will coincide with the Chesapeake Fire & Ice Festival on Saturday, Feb. 21.

The Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum's newest exhibit, "Bear Me Into Freedom: The Talbot County of Frederick Douglass," opens at the end of this month.

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). A recent presentation was made to the Maryland Rural Caucus on the tourism industry and its positive impact on Maryland's economy. This week, the pair will represent the department at the Taste of the Eastern Shore and Maryland Tourism Day in Annapolis.

VI. Town Reports

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

VII. Comments from Board Members

Ms. Kilmon presented a short slide deck on the 2025 Waterfowl Festival, focused on attendance and economic impact.

VIII. Comments from the Public

No comments.

IX. Upcoming Meetings

Tourism Board Meetings - May 13, Sept. 9, Nov. 11, and December Holiday Gathering

X. Adjournment

The meeting adjourned at 9:32 a.m. after a motion by Jessica Bellis that was seconded by Amy Kreiner.