

**Economic Development Commission  
Meeting Minutes**

Thursday, March 5, 2026

8 a.m.

Talbot County Free Library

**I. Welcome and Call to Order**

Debbie Walsworth called the meeting to order at 8:09 a.m.

**Members Present:** Ted Bautz, Walter Chase, Sr., John Horner, Reza Jafari, Chris Kleppinger, Ken Kozel, Amy Kreiner, Dr. Michael Meier, Dr. David Montgomery, Clay Stamp, Terenda Thomas, Cassandra Vanhooser, Deborah Walsworth

**Members Absent:** Al Bond, Chuck Callahan, Dr. Clifford Coppersmith, Dr. Shannon Potter Dill, Barbara Ranson, Micah Risher, Rob Straebel, Jackie Wilson

**Guests:** Dr. Carolanne Burkardt, Liz Connelly, Kimberly Kratovil, Dana Newman, Brennan Tarleton, and Scott Warner, Bryce Yelton

**Staff:** Kristen Goller and Ryan Snow

**II. Introduction of New Member**

Ms. Walsworth introduced Dr. Michael Meier of St. Michaels as a newly appointed member of the commission. A native of Amarillo, Texas, Dr. Meier attended engineering school and medical school at Vanderbilt University in Nashville before entering the Navy as a medical officer. He lived in Virginia, Florida, North Carolina, and Spain before landing in the Washington, D.C. area for the last 16 years of his 22-year career in the Navy. He has three daughters and six grandchildren. In 2020, Dr. Meier and his wife, Brooke Kimbrough, moved from Warrenton, Virginia, to St Michaels when they bought the oldest home in town, The Snuggery, in the heart of the Historic District. In August 2025, they started operating it as a B&B, The Snuggery Inn & Suites.

**III. Approval of Meeting Minutes – December 4, 2025**

Ms. Walsworth noted that the minutes were sent prior to the meeting and asked if anyone had comments or corrections. Mr. Bautz made a motion to approve the minutes as written. Mr. Jafari seconded the motion, which passed unanimously.

**IV. Guest Speakers – Brennan Tarleton and Bryce Yelton**

Mr. Tarleton, Talbot County Planning Officer, introduced himself and then invited assistant planning officer Bryce Yelton to outline the County's process for drafting its latest comprehensive plan. Wallace-Montgomery is preparing the individual chapters

of the plan. Each chapter will enter a public comment phase before being reviewed by the Planning Commission.

Mr. Yelton then walked the commission through the Economic Development and Tourism chapter, which draws heavily from the Economic Development and Tourism Strategic Plan. He encouraged EDC members to review the chapter and submit comments through Engage Talbot and attend the Planning Commission's public review of this chapter at 9 a.m. on March 25 in the Bradley Meeting Room. Any comments submitted prior to that date will be considered as part of the review.

Ms. Vanhooser noted that the draft strategic plan includes a robust data package, and the two documents should be compared to ensure consistency. After discussion, the commission agreed to form a committee to review the chapter. Mr. Bautz, Mr. Jafari, Dr. Meier, and Dr. Montgomery volunteered to serve.

#### **V. Mark C. Perna Visit – Dr. Carolanne Burkhardt**

While not formally on the agenda, Dr. Burkhardt dropped by to speak to the commission regarding the upcoming visit by Mark C. Perna. This visit, financially supported by Talbot County Economic Development and Tourism through the Maryland Rural Economic Development Fund, is scheduled for April 13-14, 2026. The author will speak at Easton and St. Michaels High Schools and hold additional sessions open to the public. Dr. Burkhardt thanked Ms. Vanhooser for bringing this opportunity forward and shared that the schools are utilizing the event as an opportunity to strengthen connections with the community.

#### **VI. Council Report – Clay Stamp**

Mr. Stamp offered a Council report as Mr. Callahan was unable to attend. The current Council is entering its fourth year, so they are working to close out existing projects. These projects have focused heavily on education and infrastructure. As the County develops its FY27 budget, it remains on target for hitting its FY26 numbers. While federal and state uncertainties swirl, Talbot County has positioned itself well. Recognizing that homelessness and hunger issues are rising, the county is establishing an Office of Community Partners to work with local non-profits. Mr. Stamp recognized Ms. Walsworth, Ms. Vanhooser, and the full committee for their efforts on the strategic plan. He thanked Mr. Tarleton and Mr. Yelton for leading the development of the comprehensive plan. He noted that the County needs to update its comprehensive water and sewer plan, which will be undertaken as the comprehensive plan wraps.

#### **VII. Director's Report – Cassandra M. Vanhooser**

**Secretary Harry Coker, Jr. Tour of Talbot County** — On March 2, we had the privilege of hosting Maryland Department of Commerce Secretary Harry Coker, Jr. for a full-day tour of Talbot County. The visit allowed the team to showcase the

breadth of the County's economy and the collaborative partnerships that make our work successful. The tour included the Frederick Douglass Park on the Tuckahoe, University of Maryland Shore Regional Medical Center in Easton. An the F3 Tech Biotechnology Manufacturing Facility. The day concluded with visits that showcased Talbot County's arts and tourism economy, including the Avalon Theatre, the Chesapeake Bay Maritime Museum, and The Golden Hour. The visit successfully illustrated the unique combination of heritage, innovation, entrepreneurship, and quality of life that defines Talbot County. My sincere thanks to the many partners who helped make the day a success.

**Grant Administration and Closeout** — Ms. is currently working through the closeout and reporting requirements for a number of grant programs. Most notable are the 14 projects funded through the Maryland Rural Economic Development Fund (MREDF). These projects have supported small businesses and community assets across Talbot County and represent an important investment in rural economic vitality. Ms. Vanhooser and Mr. Snow also are working with Easton Utilities to restructure the EDA application that was submitted in July 2025 a second time to exclude the electric substation. They are hoping to now make the March Internal Review Committee meeting at EDA. (If we ever get this grant, we're going to have a party like no other!)

**Talbot County Council Work Session: Economic Development and Tourism Strategic Plan** — The Talbot County Council recently held a work session focused on the Talbot County Economic Development and Tourism Strategic Plan and its priorities for the coming years on March 24. The discussion centered on implementation strategies, partnerships, and the role of economic development and tourism in shaping the County's long-term prosperity. The plan will go to Council again in March for final approval.

**Talbot Works Business Academy** — The Talbot Works Business Academy continues to serve as an important pipeline for local entrepreneurship. These sessions provide valuable insight into the County's small business environment—particularly in hospitality, retail, food and beverage, and service-based enterprises that shape the visitor experience. Final presentations: March 17. Graduation: March 24.

**Mark Perna Visit and CTE Open Houses** — National workforce and education speaker Mark Perna will visit Talbot County on April 13-14, speaking at Easton and St. Michaels high schools. Each event will include a Career and Technical Education Open House showcasing the wide range of career pathways available to students. These events reinforce the important connection between workforce development, career awareness, and the long-term sustainability of Talbot County's economy.

**Talbot County Business Appreciation Summit** — Now in its 19th year, the Talbot County Business Appreciation Summit remains the County's signature annual event celebrating the leadership and resilience of the local business community. This year's keynote speaker will be Dr. Dell Gines, a nationally recognized expert on

entrepreneurship and artificial intelligence in economic development. Plan to attend on May 14.

## **VIII. Town Reports**

### **IX.**

Town representatives reported on news from their jurisdiction. Dr. Montgomery reported on recent events within the Town of Easton. The town's comprehensive plan will be released for public comment soon. On March 25, the town council will begin reviewing departmental budgets for FY27, including economic development.

D. Meier reported for St. Michaels, noting that the business association has appointed a new board with Max Stewart of Chesapeake Bay Outfitters as the president. They are considering an expansion as the Bay 100 Business League. Dr. Meier is working to understand the causes behind empty storefronts in St. Michaels. He also asked the County to assist with what is perceived as blighted houses at the entry to town, in which Mr. Tarleton noted that Dr. Meier can connect with him directly. A development with townhomes are planned for construction. The town hopes to expand the walking trails from the north end to the ball fields. Mr. Chase shared that Trappe has received a training grant for water and sewer. The town's restaurants are doing well and budget preparation for FY27 begins next week.

Representatives from Oxford and Queen Anne were not present.

### **X. Open Comments**

Mr. Kozel provided a construction update for the regional medical center. The project's costs have increased from \$540 to \$665 million. A broker is assisting with the sale of the current hospital property. Five proposals have been received, and Mr. Kozel is hoping for a final recommendation by summer, although the proposals have come in lower than anticipated.

Mr. Horner relayed that remediation efforts are still taking place, exceeding minimum requirements, at Bay Street Pond. January was the coldest month on record in over 30 years. Easton Utilities recognizes that some households are facing hardships. His team encourages any customer in this situation to call to talk through options.

Mr. Jafari is working to bring an AI company from Switzerland to the US, utilizing Maryland's soft-landing program.

Mr. Warner commended Ms. Vanhooser for her work on Sec. Coker's visit to Talbot County and provided an update from the Mid-Shore Regional Council. Of Talbot County's fourteen projects, only one remains, and that is because it came in under budget, so it's expected to close by May 31. Through his role on the Maryland Broadband Cooperative, he announced the successful negotiation with Amazon to run a pipe from Ireland to Ocean City.

**XI. Final Remarks and Announcements for Upcoming Meetings**

- 2026 EDC Meeting Dates: June 4, September 3, December 3
- April 13-14: Mark C. Perna Visit
- May 14: Business Appreciation Summit

**XII. Adjournment**

The meeting adjourned at approximately 9:59 a.m.