



Town Council MEETING MINUTES

Tuesday, September 3, 2024 - 5:30 PM
Council Chambers, Easton Town Office
14 S Harrison Street

4:30 PM Artificial Intelligence Workshop.

Mayor Megan JM Cook
Council President Frank Gunsallus
Mr. Don Abbatiello

Also, present was the interim Town Manager, Mr. Alan Lowrey, Town Attorney Mrs. Sharon VanEmburch, Finance Officer Carol Callahan, IT Director Scott Messick and Town Clerk Mrs. Kathy M. Ruf.

Present from Easton Utilities was John Horner, President and CEO, Fred Christie, Chief Information Officer, and Kurt Fuchs, Manager External Affairs.

President Gunsallus opened the workshop at 4:31 p.m.

Rev. Davis joined the meeting at 4:39 p.m.

President Gunsallus discussed the purpose of this evening's workshop. He stated that the purpose of this workshop is to facilitate collaborative discussion among key stakeholders on the potential development of an AI governance policy for the Town of Easton. As AI technology influences various aspects of municipal operations, it is essential to establish a framework and ensure these technologies are used responsibly, ethically, and transparently.

President Gunsallus introduced his panel and those present from the Town of Easton. He stated that this workshop aims to assess current AI uses, discuss practices, establish a common understanding and determine next steps.

Mr. Christie discussed Predictive AI and Generative AI. He discussed how Easton Utilities is using generative AI.

Chief Lowrey discussed how Easton Police Department is using AI especially with Public Information Act requests. He discussed using AI for police reports. He stated they haven't embraced that yet.

Mr. Christie discussed how privacy and bias affect and edits AI. He discussed maintenance management systems.

Mr. Abbatiello questioned the cost of these programs. Mr. Christie stated that a lot of the information is free.

Mr. Christie stated that acceptable use policy and training is essential.

President Gunsallus discussed having an acceptable use policy.

Rev. Davis stated that from an HR perspective.

Mr. Messick discussed implementing a policy and proper training.

Mr. Christie stated their biggest challenge is privacy. He discussed an acceptable use policy where employees are expected to use AI correctly.

Mr. Abbatiello discussed his experience with AI.

Chief Lowrey discussed challenges going forward in law enforcement using AI.

Mr. Christie discussed how Easton Utilities IT Department is meeting monthly about AI. He stated they are using AI for maintenance management as well.

Mr. Abbatiello asked about the cost of these programs in the long term. Mr. Christie stated that it depends on the application but a lot of it is free. He stated that training and monitoring is essential.

President Gunsallus discussed having an acceptable use policy.

Rev. Davis stated that HR should be at the table and discussing policies.

Mr. Abbatiello discussed protecting the privacy of employees and the public and whenever this moves forward, those concerns should be paramount.

Rev. Davis stated that we should identify the risks, research the regulations and establish core principals from an HR perspective while safeguarding personal information.

Mr. Christie stated he would not use NIST. He stated that he does not think the government knows how to handle this.

Mr. Christie stated that the FBI, Baltimore Field Office is coming on September 19 to talk to Easton Utilities to teach and be more proactive. He stated that FBI is eager to help. He stated there is a big push from the government to be more proactive.

President Gunsallus stated that the public needs to be made aware what the town is doing regarding AI.

President Gunsallus adjourned the workshop at 5:07 p.m.

5:30 PM: Call to Order by President Gunsallus.

Mayor Megan JM Cook

Council President Frank Gunsallus
Ms. Maureen Curry
Mr. Don Abbatiello
Mr. David Montgomery
Rev. Elmer Davis

Also present was the Interim Town Manager, Mr. Lowrey, Town Attorney Mrs. Sharon VanEmburch, and Town Clerk Mrs. Kathy M. Ruf.

Opening remarks and Pledge of Allegiance by Councilmember Abbatiello .

Mr. Abbatiello gave opening remarks and led those present in the Pledge of Allegiance.

Approval of Minutes.

Meeting minutes of August 19, 2024 meeting.

Upon motion by Mr. Abbatiello, seconded by Mr. Montgomery and carried unanimously, minutes of the August 19, 2024, meeting were approved as written.

Municipal Official Items.

Items by Mayor Cook.

Mayor Cook stated that the Town is installing water fountains on the rails-to-trails. She stated the town is working in conjunction with Easton Utilities. She stated she is thankful for their partnership.

Recognition of Service for Lee Gordon's Appointment to the Easton Utilities Commission.

John Horner, President and CEO of Easton Utilities, stated he is thankful to Ms. Gordon for her time on Easton Utilities Commission. Mr. Horner recognized Lee Gordon's service and presented her with a pewter plaque. Ms. Gordon was appointed April 2023. for a six year term. Mr. Horner discussed the accomplishments during Ms. Gordon's tenure
Mr. Horner Introduced Cheryl Palumbo that will fulfill the remainder of Ms. Gordon's term.

Oath of Office Administered to Cheryl R. Palumbo for Easton Utilities Commission Appointment.

Mayor Cook administered the Oath of Office to Cheryl Palumbo for the remainder of a six-year term expiring April 21, 2027 on the Easton Utilities Commission.

Attainable Taskforce staff and co-chair update

Miguel Salinas was present to discuss the Attainable Task Force. He stated they started in May and have met eight times.

Michael Port was present to discuss the scope of the project. He stated they have had two or three meetings of diving into the strategies themselves. Mr. Port stated that they plan to address the council with a report in late October or early November.

Upon motion by Rev. Davis, seconded by Mr. Abbatiello and carried unanimously, approval was granted to extend the time limit for the report for at least two more meetings.

Items by Interim Town Manager

Easton High School Parking Recommendation.

Mr. Lowrey brought up a request for parking modification around Easton High School. He stated that it is currently a residential zoned district and allows for two hours of parking between the hours of 8am to 6pm unless you're a resident of that neighborhood and have a residential permit. Based upon meetings and complaints, a recommendation is being made to change that district to a residential-only parking from 7am to 4pm with no two-hour exception. that will help the police department with enforcement, as if you don't have a residential permit within those hours, parking will be in violation and can be ticketed. He stated there will be plenty of notice. He stated that due to the residential areas being codified in the Code, the change will require an amendment of legislation to change from a 2-hour parking to No Parking during those hours.

Mr. Abbatiello stated that residents on Ellwood would like to be included as well for No Parking.

Rev. Davis asked if the high school had been notified of the changes and if a parking permit could be issued throughout the year. Chief Lowrey stated that he has spoken with the principal, Ms. Spurry and she stated the parking permits do not sell out and there is availability to get the permit throughout the year.

Ms. Curry asked if there is a cost to the students for the permits. Mr. Abbatiello stated that there is.

Pres. Gunsallus stated there is not a shortage of parking spaces. He discussed outreach efforts. He applauded those that helped to work out a plan.

Public Assembly Event, Fall Kickoff

Upon motion by Ms. Curry seconded by Rev. Davis and carried unanimously, Public Assembly Event, Fall Kickoff was approved.

Public Assembly Event, 53rd Annual Waterfowl Festival

Ms. Deena Kilmon, Executive Director, was present. She introduced the staff.

Upon motion by Ms. Curry, seconded by Mr. Abbatiello and carried unanimously, the Public Assembly Event for the 53rd Annual Waterfowl Festival, transportation plan and food vendors were approved.

Items by Town Attorney.

The Town Attorney stated she has nothing at this time.

Presentation

Cassandra Vanhooser; Accommodation Tax Request

Ms. Vanhooser was present to discuss the Public Accommodations Taxes. She stated that the Tourism Board has requested the Talbot County Council increase the tax by 2%.

Ms. Vanhooser stated that the tax is currently set at 4% and Talbot County is the lowest in the state. Ms. VanHooser stated that most neighbors are at 5 to 6%. She stated that with support of the municipalities, the increase requires legislation at the state level. She asked that the municipalities request to the state delegation to increase the accommodation tax by 2%. She discussed the benefits of an increase.

Ms. VanHooser stated that Holly DeKarske has reached out to some of the local hotels. She discussed what the increase would net the municipalities and the benefits of an increase.

Talbot County meets with the state delegation on October 1 to discuss legislation.

Mr. Abbatiello asked what the proposal compares to neighboring counties.

Mr. Montgomery stated he fully supports raising the accommodation tax to 6%.

Pres. Gunsallus asked how much of the accommodation tax is used for tourism. Ms.

VanHooser stated 200%.

Upon motion by Rev. Davis, seconded by Mr. Montgomery, approval was granted to support an increase in the Accommodation Tax.

Legislation.

Ord. No. 828, "AN ORDINANCE OF THE TOWN OF EASTON AMENDING THE CARRY FORWARD CAPITAL FUND EXPENDITURES FOR FISCAL YEAR 2025."

Mr. Lowrey discussed the re-allocation of funds.

Mr. VanEmburch gave background information on the Port Street infrastructure to the Woodland Parks parking lot.

Mr. VanEmburch discussed the request and reiterated that the carry forward ordinance that was passed in June had projects on it that needed more funding or have been completed. He discussed the Port Street underground project. He stated the project is over one million dollars short. The project will cost 3.1 million dollars. He stated that the ARPA funds must be obligated by the end of this calendar year. He stated it is time-sensitive and can't be obligated and built by the end of this year, but the rails-to-trails can be constructed within this timeframe. Mr. VanEmburch stated that \$50,000 could be used for upgrades across the street at the Welcome Center and \$862,781 can be used for Woodland Parks improvements to the road and the park which would bring the project to completion. Woodland Park proposed amenities were discussed. Mr. VanEmburch stated what is proposed is a 35 space parking lot, 3500 LF paved walking trail, 2.2 miles of wooded walking trails, a bathroom facility and 10 acre of reforestation.

Ms. Curry asked if we are abandoning the Port Street project. Mayor Cook stated that it is not being abandoned. She stated that they intend to complete the rails-to-trail through Moton Park. Mayor Cook stated that the walking park would be much like Oxford Park. She stated the improvements would get people to the park and utilize the 200 acres we received the grant for.

It was suggested having a workshop on the budget re-allocation.

Pres. Gunsallus set the public hearing for September 16, 2024.

Mr. Montgomery asked how Woodland Park was considered instead of other priorities that were considered in the budget workshops. He asked how it is being promoted now when there were other priorities that we could not fund.

Mr. Abbatiello asked the Town Engineer if the \$50,000 for the Welcome Center will complete the project. Mr. VanEmburch stated that Mr. Newcomb will be able to address that.

Rev. Davis asked how much it would cost to get down Port Street with the infrastructure. Mr. VanEmburch stated the bids came in significantly higher. He stated that the carry forwards need to get more attention and this was one of the lessons learned. Mr. VanEmburch stated we have to do better on the next round.

Mr. Abbatiello discussed safety on rails-to-trails.

Ms. Curry suggested a workshop. She stated she is not willing to vote on this tonight.

Mr. Abbatiello asked that other budget considerations be brought to the workshop.

Mr. Montgomery asked for clarification of what is expected from Easton Utilities and what is done by the Town of Easton Engineering Department.

Mr. Abbatiello asked if we could move forward with the \$50,000 for the Visitor's Center.

Traffic signal conversions were discussed.

Mr. Abbatiello asked for an update on the ARPA money and potential projects at the workshop.

President Gunsallus asked that budget concerns be brought to the workshop.

Res. 6196, "A RESOLUTION OF THE TOWN OF EASTON AUTHORIZING THE EXECUTION OF A MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING WITH TALBOT COUNTY, MARYLAND REGARDING THE TRANSFER OF 925 PORT STREET."

The Town Attorney stated that the county owns the property. She stated it is along Port Street on the north side of the street. She stated the county owns it and it needs work and historic renovation. She stated it is subject to Open Space Easement, and it has to be park related uses. Ms. VanEmburch discussed possible proposed uses such as a museum or various park-related uses.

Ms. Curry stated that she is concerned that this is a money pit.

The Town Attorney stated that after the transfer, it will need to be annexed into the Town.

Ms. Curry stated she is not ready to vote on this as she wants to see the condition of the building.

Pete Leshner, Talbot County Council, stated that the motivation for the council to turn this over is due to the Town having a vision for Easton Point. He stated that the Talbot County Council may look at this differently if demolition was being considered.

Res. No. 6196 was tabled until September 16.

Ord. No. 829, "AN ORDINANCE OF THE TOWN OF EASTON REMOVING THE REQUIRED FEE CHARGED BY RETAIL ESTABLISHMENTS FOR PAPER BAGS

Pres. Gunsallus read a statement regarding removing the required fee for paper bags. He stated it is an extra burden on those that can least afford it.

Mr. Montgomery discussed a disproportionate fee.

Ms. Curry stated she has heard that the bag fee is working and the \$.10 is not erroneous for many consumers. She stated she had heard nothing but positive comments.

Mr. Abbatiello discussed the reasoning for the legislation requiring payment of \$.10 for bags. He stated that paper bags pollute just as much as plastic bags.

Rev. Davis stated that the legislation has taught him to bring his bag and be responsible. He stated the ordinance needs to stay as it is. He stated it has disciplined shoppers to bring their bag.

Mr. Montgomery stated that the majority of the people he hears from says that the bag fee is irritating.

Ms. Curry asked for a show of hands in the audience for those that want the ordinance and bag fee to remain as it is. The majority of the audience was in favor of the \$.10 fee.

President Gunsallus stated that the ordinance will be discussed at a public hearing.

Mr. Abbatiello discussed the process and stated that everyone should have an opportunity to speak.

Ms. Curry made a motion to not move Ord. 829 forward to the next meeting, seconded by Rev. Davis. Vote: died 3-2 with Ms. Curry and Rev. Davis voting yes.

At 7:20 p.m., President Gunsallus recessed the meeting for five minutes.

At 7:29 p.m., President Gunsallus reconvened the meeting.

Public Participation/Comments.

Elaine Toma, 8146 Beave Neck Court, Plastic Free Easton discussed getting this ordinance action passed in 2022.

Ms. Toma asked the council to vote against any changes in very successful law.

Ronald Leshner, who lived here more than 30 years, encouraged individuals to read Moby Duck.

Shari Wilcoxon, Waverly Road, Easton, stated she is stunned at some of the comments. Ms. Wilcoxon

stated that it is strictly a freedom of choice and asked that the merchants decide themselves.
Herman Jeffrey Harrison, Talbot Waterman's Association stated he is amazed that he hasn't seen one plastic bag in the water.
Sara Price, MD Retailers Alliance, Annapolis, MD stated she strongly recommends leaving the ordinance as passed.
Mary Yancey, 333 Washington Street, stated she is baffled by an attempt to change the law as passed.
Mary Little, 524 Goldsborough Street, questioned who the majority is. She asked the council to stay the course.
Virginia Wheelan Kerr, discussed being responsible. She stated she would like to see the Port Street project move forward.
Betty Macky, Easton, discussed people that find it a hardship to carry a bag. She stated there are so many ways to handle carrying a bag.
James Brennan, Village Lake Way, Easton, stated this ordinance has put Easton on the map for a lot of reasons. He questioned why this issue is being raised now. He stated he wants no changes to the ordinance.
Herman Espenhorst, Arbor Place, stated that in Maine the bags are \$.25. He stated if it's not broke, don't fix it.
Richard Arnold, Goldsborough Street, stated this will not be forgotten the next election.
Grace Soltus, Village Lake Way, stated she is appalled that this issue is revisited. She reminded the council of the burden of pollution.
Shari Wilcoxon, stated she is struggling to understand the comments about plastic. This is not about plastic but about the retailers charging \$.10 for a bag.
Grace Soltus, Village Lake Way, stated if you take away the fee, there will be more pollution.

Items by Members of the Council:

Ms. Curry thanked everyone for coming out this evening. She reminded everyone that First Friday is this week. She stated the celebration for Lizzy Dee's 20th Anniversary will be Friday.
Mr. Abbatiello thanked Mr. Harrison for coming out and speaking. Mr. Abbatiello mentioned Wednesday, September 11 as the Memorial Service for the events of 911 at 8:30 a.m.
Mr. Montgomery thanked Mr. Abbatiello for the reminder for the Memorial Service.
Rev. Davis thanked everyone for expressing their concerns. He stated there was great dialogue this evening. Rev. Davis reminded everyone that school has started to be careful during school time.
Pres. Gunsallus thanked everyone for coming out and exercising their right.

Adjournment.

At 8:09 p.m., upon motion by Rev. Davis, seconded by Mr. Montgomery and carried unanimously, President Gunsallus adjourned the regularly scheduled meeting.

Respectfully submitted,

Kathy M. Ruf, Town Clerk