

Easton’s Strategic Legislative Priorities 2026

Detailed Summary: Town of Easton Legislative Priorities Meeting

Date: October 23, 2025, 8:00 a.m.

Location: Town of Easton, Tidewater Inn Carriage House **Duration:** Approximately 2 hours

Attendees: Mayor Megan JM Cook, Town Manager Andy Kitzrow, Town Attorney Sharon VanEmburch, Town Clerk Kathy Ruf, Town of Easton Council Members Ms. Curry, Mr. Rankin, Dr. Montgomery, Rev. Davis, President Abbatiello, Chief of Police Alan Lowrey, Town Engineer Rick VanEmburch, Kody Cario, Director of Planning Miguel Salinas, Easton Utilities President and CEO John Horner, VP Electric and Utility Projects John Hines, EEDC Director Holly DeKarske, State Senator Johnny Mautz, Delegates Tom Hutchinson and Chris Adams.

1. Welcome and Introductions

Overview

- The meeting opened with introductions of all attendees, including town officials, department heads, and state legislators.
- State officials and local council members were offered the floor to make introductory comments.
- Noteworthy: The event is resuming after a hiatus since 2019 due to the pandemic. There was a blessing for breakfast, and the meeting was recorded.

2. Opening Remarks from Elected Officials

State Senator Johnny Mautz

- Acknowledged the importance of direct communication, encouraged attendees to use mobile numbers for legislative access.
- Noted that the legislative session starts later this year (January 14, 2026).
- Described the legislative process for local priorities and bill introduction.
- Emphasized the possibility for last-minute bill introductions and rule waivers if required.
- Encouraged ongoing, honest communication about priority projects.

Delegate Chris Adams

- Marking the 11th year serving, highlighted roles on the Economic Matters Committee, with focus on business/economic and energy policy.
- Chairs the Eastern Shore Delegation (4 Senators, 12 Delegates).
- Key focus: Ensuring rural priorities are heard and funded in Annapolis.

Delegate Tom Hutchinson

- Discussed committee work on Health and Government Operations, especially access to care and workforce shortages for the Eastern Shore.
- Emphasized representing local health/wellness issues in Annapolis.

Town Council Members

- Expressed strong support for the process and recognition of the importance of state partnership in setting legislative priorities.

3. Housekeeping and Meeting Format

- Attendees provided with blue binders containing printed project details.
- Slides presented in parallel to live discussion.
- Questions encouraged throughout the presentation, with time at the end for further discussion.
- Meeting officially recorded for records.

4. Mayor's Vision and Overview

Mayor Cook’s Remarks

- Outlined tenure of two years; feels established in the role.
- Stated an ambition for Easton to be the “best place to live and work on Maryland's Eastern Shore.”
- Core Values: Safety, Service, Character.
- Vision grounded in intentional investments enhancing infrastructure, mobility, safety, and quality of life.
- Emphasized need for partnership with state leaders to realize shared goals.

5. Main Topics Discussed and Project Summaries

A. WOODLAND PARK DEVELOPMENT

Overview:

- Nearly 200 acres of acquired preserved green space (160 acres mature woods).
- Acquisition funded in 2023: \$5M from Maryland Department of Natural Resources (DNR) Program Open Space.
- Currently, no public access.

- Proposed improvements: - 3+ miles of natural walking trails - ~1 mile ADA-accessible paved trail - Public restroom facility, parking area - Wetland restoration (to be constructed via Ducks Unlimited grant)
- Talbot County Public Schools: Interested in the park for hosting cross-country meets (currently must travel out of county).
- Significant portion of construction to be performed in-house to control costs (expecting to reduce costs by up to 50%).
- Financial Ask: \$1.5M construction funding (top priority; requested for inclusion in state’s capital budget).
- Current readiness: Design completed and ready for construction.

Discussion Highlights:

- Need for continued advocacy with DNR and grant funding bodies.
- Confirmation of relationships with DNR and prior site visits.
- Emphasis on in-house construction to maximize state dollars.

B. RAILS TO TRAILS EXPANSION

Overview:

- Masterplan: >20 miles of interconnected trails across Easton (<11 sq. mi).
- Trails function as both recreation and practical transportation (walking/biking to work, school, parks).
- Addresses growth east of Route 50 and aims to connect all neighborhoods.
- Upcoming phases: - Extension across and to the south of town, connecting neighborhoods, schools, and parks. - Integration with planned state at-grade crossings on Route 50 (pedestrian bridge aspirational, \$10M+). - Bridge has been designed to 65%, pending funding and further collaboration with State Highway Administration (SHA).
- In-house construction proposed for most segments (excluding bridge).
- Safety, accessibility, and connecting underserved parts of Easton (especially east side of Route 50) are key goals.
- Financial Outline: - Phase 2 (current focus): \$2.5M - Full system build-out: ~\$20M
- Flexibility in approach – will use at-grade crossings first, pursue bridge if feasible.
- Ongoing negotiations needed for property acquisitions and rights-of-way in some trail segments.
- Coordination with county for future outside-town connections (e.g., Frederick Douglass Park rail bed).

Discussion Highlights:

- Community strongly supports in-town trails; outside-town connections facing landowner opposition.
- State's role in facilitating property negotiations and securing additional grants was discussed.
- Safety concerns regarding crossing Route 50, particularly for east side residents feeling isolated.
- Discussion of sidewalk policy bills and ADA compliance.
- Potential for multi-jurisdictional trail development but noted political and landowner sensitivities.

C. EASTON POINT PARK

Overview:

- Only community waterfront park in the town (600+ miles of shoreline but limited public access).
- Significant previous improvements: new entry, rails-to-trails extension, collaborations with Phillips Wharf, additional land acquisition, shoreline restoration.
- Future vision: - Entrance at Flood Avenue to educational center, new parking, vehicular/bike/pedestrian access to waterfront. - Boat ramp and vehicle/trailer parking. - Waterfront and shoreline enhancement, park expansion. - Plan integrates with environmental education and public space improvements.
- Financial Ask: \$750,000 (Phase 1, construction-ready) from state capital budget.
- Total project estimate: \$3.6M (multiple phases; leveraging federal/state grants for certain components like living shoreline/boating access).
- Majority of construction to use in-house public works resources.

Discussion Highlights:

- Readiness to begin construction as soon as funds are available (“shovel ready”).
- Comparison drawn with Salisbury’s riverfront and their leveraging of multiple funding sources (e.g., Brownfields).
- Exploring all available DNR and federal funding streams.

D. CRITICAL STREETS SAFETY & ACCESSIBILITY UPGRADES

Overview:

- Focus on three key "gateway" streets: North Washington Street, South Washington Street, Port Street.
- Goal: Add/reconstruct sidewalks and bike lanes to create safe, accessible, ADA-compliant pedestrian/cyclist routes, particularly serving lower-income neighborhoods.
- North Washington Street: From town center north to Northeastern Sports Complex.
- South Washington Street: From Idlewild Park south to YMCA and area schools/synagogue.
- Port Street: Connects rail trail at Moton Park/Talbot pool east to Washington Street and downtown; current sidewalks need repairs, upgrades.
- Financial Ask: \$3M (incremental/phased, leveraging partnerships and grants; priority focus on North Washington).
- Challenges: - Conflicts between ownership (some areas are SHA, some owned by town). - Historic difficulties with state installation and maintenance of sidewalks (ADA compliance issues, repeated

rebuids). - Ongoing goal to obtain Sustainable Communities designation (already recertified), which increases grant eligibility.

Discussion Highlights:

- Strong caution from delegates not to hastily assume responsibility for state-owned streets (long-term maintenance can be an unsustainable burden, as seen in other towns).
- Need to prioritize based on impact and partial funding opportunities.
- Opportunities to leverage new and existing grant streams for sidewalk/bike path work.
- Emphasis on using the town's engineering capabilities, robust ADA team, and leveraging in-house efficiencies.
- Noted that current challenge is getting SHA to prioritize repairs within town boundaries.

E. TRIANGLE PARK AT DOVER (DESIGN PROJECT)

Overview:

- Ambitious park/civic anchor at key East End gateway (Dover Road & Rails to Trails corridor).
- Community-driven concept design via 5-day public charrette (October 2024); full integration into East End masterplan.
- Objectives: - Reconfigure intersections, extend park, add parking, decorative street treatments, safer crossings. - Create signature gathering space with water feature and public art. - Manage stormwater (replace existing detention ponds with more usable green/public space). - Leverage private reinvestment/redevelopment around the new civic anchor (public infrastructure to spur economic and cultural revival).
- Site includes town-owned property and significant engagement with adjacent private owners.
- Financial Ask: \$300,000 (fund detailed site/infrastructure design and engineering, including stormwater management).
- Future: Additional funding to be sought for construction pending design completion.

Discussion Highlights:

- Noted analogy to Salisbury's Unity Square transformation and impact.
- Broad consensus on potential catalytic impact.
- Strong support from District 4 and neighborhood stakeholders.
- Construction to proceed in close step with private redevelopment and investment.

F. LEGISLATIVE ASK: TRAFFIC SAFETY ENFORCEMENT ON ROUTE 50

Overview:

- Easton has adopted a strategic highway safety plan and developed a public accident/crash data dashboard.
- Route 50 is a hotspot: recent five fatalities (does not include additional two pedestrian deaths in 2025).
- Speed a critical factor: Pedestrian survival at 40mph is 15%, at 30mph is 50%.
- Implementation of state-funded at-grade crossings expected to increase pedestrian use of Route 50, raising urgency for speed enforcement.
- Specific Legislative Request: Authority for the Town of Easton to implement photo speed enforcement (speed cameras) on designated zones of Route 50 (as has been done in PG and Montgomery Counties and Baltimore area).
- Challenges: - Law enforcement and EMS staffing shortages make constant physical enforcement difficult. - Volunteer fire/EMS teams are stretched meeting the demand from frequent traffic accidents. - State precedent: Difficult, multi-year battles to obtain enabling legislation for local speed camera use (examples from Prince George's, Talbot counties cited; highly controversial in the General Assembly). - Specificity needed in legislative language as to location, usage, etc.

Discussion Highlights:

- Delegates express strong caution; past efforts for speed camera bills have been contentious and time-consuming in Annapolis.
- Red-light cameras may be an easier legislative win; speed cameras face bipartisan opposition.
- There may be alternative solutions: traffic calming, expanding 35 mph zones further outside town, better signage, more visible enforcement warning to drivers.
- Delegation and police chief to coordinate on best approach/narrative for success in Annapolis; data-driven advocacy recommended.
- Acknowledgement that traffic safety (including on Route 50) affects both Easton and broader region.

G. EASTON UTILITIES REMARKS

Overview:

- Thanks offered for partnership with town and state delegation; legislative "rack cards" included for reference.
- Formation of statewide alliance of the five municipal electric utilities for greater advocacy in Annapolis.
- Utility Priorities: - Early-stage feasibility of new local generation (potential 2 MW solar array with battery storage; potential new fossil-fueled generation due to aging fleet). - Maintain/expand "microgrid" capability for resilience and reliability; concern that current summer/winter peaks approach maximum capacity. - Caution against statewide legislation that unintentionally restricts municipal generation ownership or operations. - Continued need for capital grant/funding support (esp. for wastewater, environmental infrastructure; example: Bay Restoration Fund). - State climate/energy policies should not undermine local reliability or affordability.

- Concerns flagged about overreach of net zero mandates and broad-brush legislative requirements; asks that “all the above” energy portfolio remain viable.

Discussion Highlights:

- Legislators recognize unique status of municipal utilities versus investor-owned utilities; pledge to protect their flexibility.
- Ongoing discussions regarding state energy/climate policy impacts expected in the upcoming legislative session.
- Commitment to “do no harm” to existing local generation and service models.
- Discussion about state’s net zero policies and pressures, with acknowledgment that aspirations must not undermine reliability or affordability.

6. Extended Discussion & Comments

- Reminder of importance of communication between local/state government for successful advocacy and project advancement.
- Acknowledgement and remembrance of the late Delegate Charles Otto, and his mentorship of town staff.
- Reflections on teamwork and resilience through the pandemic and personnel changes.

7. Action Items

For Town of Easton

- Complete capital project packets and follow-up with delegates and state agencies regarding Woodland Park, Rails to Trails, and Easton Point project asks.
- Engage DNR and SHA for interagency advocacy, site visits, and funding leverage.
- Advance Triangle Park design with requested funding, public engagement, and coordination with adjacent property owners.
- Pursue all relevant grant opportunities, including sustainable communities, transportation, DNR, federal infrastructure, and brownfields.
- Finalize sidewalk/bike lane priorities and continue seeking outside construction funding while maximizing in-house efficiency.
- Refine legislative proposal and story for Route 50 speed enforcement (legislative/committee drafting in close collaboration with state delegation).

For State Delegation

- Share contact details for continued direct constituent engagement.
- Coordinate with town staff on project advocacy strategies in Annapolis (including capital budget items and legislative asks).
- Monitor and influence state policy bills (particularly those affecting municipal utilities, trails, and traffic safety).

For Easton Utilities

- Provide updates to town and delegation on next steps for new generation planning, solar/storage feasibility, and legislative landscape.
- Monitor state energy/climate policy proposals for possible impacts on municipal autonomy and affordability.
- Continue advocacy with allied municipal utilities for favorable/mutually-protective legislation.

8. Follow-Up Items / Future Meetings

- Field visits to major project sites (Woodland Park, Triangle Park, key trail crossings) with delegation/stakeholders.
- Further meetings with DNR, SHA, and MDE regarding capital projects and funding streams.
- Legislative drafting workshops (speed camera, pedestrian safety) as warranted.
- Next year’s annual legislative priorities meeting (date TBD; anticipated October 2026).
- Regular interim updates via email/phone as budget and legislative deadlines approach (noted that session begins January 14, 2026).

9. Closing Remarks

- Thanks from Mayor Cook and council for legislative and stakeholder engagement.
- Call for continued collaboration and direct communication.
- Optimism expressed for reporting project wins and progress at the next annual meeting.

End of Summary

Respectfully submitted,

Kathy M. Ruf, Town Clerk