

Town of Easton - Attainable Housing Task Force Workshop

Date: November 17, 2025, 4:30 p.m. **Location:** 14 S Harrison Street, Town Hall Council Chambers **Facilitator:** Town Council President Don Abbatiello **Presenters:** Mr. Weber, Mr. Ports, Mr. Salinas **Time:** Workshop concluded at approximately 5:23 PM; council meeting to follow at 5:30 PM

Present: President Don Abbatiello, Councilmembers Ms. Curry, Mr. Rankin, Dr. Montgomery, Rev. Davis. Also, present was the Town Manager Mr. Andrew Kitzrow, Town Attorney Ms. VanEmburch, Chief of Police Alan Lowrey, Town Engineer Mr. Rick VanEmburch, Director of Planning Mr. Miguel Salinas, and Town Clerk Mrs. Kathy Ruf. Mayor Megan Cook was excused.

Mr. Paul Weber and Mr. Michael Ports, Co-Chairs for the Attainable Task Force were also present.

Table of Contents

- 1. Introduction & Acknowledgements
- 2. Main Topics Discussed
 - o Task Force Scope & Process
 - o Key Challenges and Local Context
 - o Task Force Findings and Takeaways
 - o Detailed Review: Five Pillars of Recommendations
 - o Extended Discussion: Partnership on Public Land
- 3. Action Items
- 4. Follow-Up

1. Introduction & Acknowledgements

- Workshop convened to review the Attainable Housing Task Force Report.
- Mr. Weber gave special recognition given to Mr. Salinas, planning staff, and task force members for their extensive time and effort. Staff invested two to three hours for every hour volunteered by task force members, including managing 11 meetings, preparing extensive materials and organizing speakers from local, state, regional, and even California experts.
- Emphasis on a thorough review—no rush to conclusion; next workshop already being planned if further discussion needed.

2. Main Topics Discussed

A. Task Force Scope & Process

- **Composition:** 18-member task force, included diverse stakeholders (community members, architects, lawyers, land use attorneys).
- **Meetings:** 11 meetings, each lasting approximately 3 hours.
- **Expert Input:** Speakers from a variety of locations and backgrounds provided insights at nearly every meeting.

B. Key Challenges and Local Context

Three Key Takeaways Identified:

- 1. **Universality of the Problem**
 - o Lack of affordable housing is not unique to Easton; this is a nationwide issue.
 - o Easton's unique characteristics exacerbate the problem:

- Limited housing supply drives prices higher.
 - Growing population of affluent retirees buying second or last homes; many cash sales.
 - Reputation as a quasi-resort attracts out-of-town buyers seeking summer/second homes.
2. **Complexity and Longevity of the Issue**
- Crisis evolved over many years with no single or simple solution.
 - Solutions must be multifaceted and locally tailored.
3. **Economic Mismatch**
- Rising costs (land, materials, labor, fees, legal) have outpaced wage growth.
 - Housing is increasingly unaffordable for average working residents.
 - The only paths to affordability: reduce/eliminate development costs, find additional revenue/subsidy sources, or reform regulations (notably, zoning).

Illustrative Data on Housing Costs:

- **Home Purchase:**
 - Market rate for 3-bedroom home: **\$451,451** (current as of unofficial update from Susie Hayward).
 - 100% Area Median Income (AMI) for Easton: **\$98,000**.
 - Affordable home price at 100% AMI: **\$304,000**.
 - Affordability gap at 100% AMI: **\$119,000**.
 - At 80% AMI (~\$80,000 annual income): affordable home price drops to \$254,000; gap widens to **\$169,000**.
- **Rentals:**
 - Market rate for 2-bedroom: **\$2100/month**.
 - At 60% AMI (~\$60,000 income): affordable rent is only ~\$1,200/month; substantial gap persists.

C. Task Force Findings and Takeaways

- **Solutions must combine changes to incentives, regulations, and public investment.**
 - Potential mechanisms for cost reduction and revenue generation:
 - Require developers to subsidize affordable units.
 - Generate new revenue streams (general funds, bonds, fees, taxes).
 - Offer tax abatements; time-limited or phased in.
 - Contribute land/infrastructure, or seek land donations.
 - Regulatory reforms:
 - Modernize zoning codes to allow greater density and variety (not just large single-family homes).

D. Detailed Review: Five Pillars of Recommendations

1. Partnership on Public Land (*In-depth discussion*)

- **Concept:** Use underutilized publicly owned land (town/county) as sites for affordable housing in partnership with qualified developers.
- **Benefits:**
 - Substantially lowers one of the largest development costs (land), enabling more affordable units.
 - Provides opportunities for demonstration/pilot projects to show what affordable housing can look like (“myth-busting”).
 - Encourages creative, collaborative design and alignment with zoning reform.
- **Process and Discussion:**
 - Identification of specific town and county-owned parcels:
 - **Town-owned land north of John Ford Park (adjacent to rail trail; potential for ground lease).**
 - **County land near Chapel Farms/Magnolia Drive (including parcels adjacent to school administration building and wooded land facing rails-to-trails).**
 - **County-owned Health Department parcel.**

- **Firehouse parcel (potential for redevelopment if a new firehouse is built).**
- Consideration of mechanisms (ground leases, deed restrictions, direct conveyance).
 - Discussion on pros/cons; ground leases provide ongoing municipal control but may not always be practical.
- Addressed concern that affordable housing is often opposed by adjacent homeowners; need for education and myth-dispelling.
- Noted need for “holistic” approach—ensuring new homeowners or renters are equipped for success (financial counseling, property management education).

2. Policy and Code Changes (*Previewed, to be discussed in detail next session*)

- **Key Directions:**
 - Encourage mixed-use (commercial + residential) development.
 - Permit residential units in commercial zones; support live-work units.
 - Increase density maximums in residential districts (“missing middle” housing, townhomes, etc.).
 - Permit construction of accessory dwelling units (“grandmother flats,” junior units).
 - Conduct a zoning “diagnostic” to identify constraints and opportunities.
 - Investigate adoption of form-based code elements to guide development while respecting community character.
 - Tie requirements for affordable/diverse housing to annexation agreements for new greenfield development.

3. Community Outreach and Education

- Develop communications to dispel myths about affordable housing (e.g., website “landing page,” informational meetings).
- Hold neighborhood meetings, town halls for public input and feedback.

4. Financial Incentives and Investments

- Consider direct and indirect financial incentives for developers:
 - Fee abatements, tax abatements, partial or full.
 - Targeted incentives for priority redevelopment sites.
 - Streamline, modernize development processes to reduce project “friction” and costs.
 - Hire a housing coordinator (potentially jointly with county).

5. Inclusionary Zoning

- Require future developments above a certain size to include a mandated percentage of affordable units at set AMI thresholds.
- Staff and consultant capacity must be maintained to oversee compliance and maintain affordability controls.

E. Extended Discussion: Partnership on Public Land

- **Concerns Raised:**
 - Some success in the past with public land-based affordable projects, but also local resistance, especially from neighborhoods fearing property value impacts.
 - The term “affordable housing” carries stigma and misunderstanding; more accurate phrasing or education is needed.
 - Even middle-income earners (e.g., starting teachers, police officers) are priced out; lowest wage workers (Wawa, McDonald’s) more so. Rental solutions may be more feasible at lowest AMI ranges.
 - Additional populations (unhoused, special needs, seniors, transitional housing) acknowledged as critical, even if not direct recipients of these recommendations.
 - Emphasis that increasing options at all rungs on the affordability ladder ultimately benefits the broader community by freeing up units for all income levels.

3. Action Items

1. **Further Workshop Scheduled**
 - **Date:** December 15, 2025, at 4:30 PM
 - **Purpose:** Continue discussion of pillars 2–5.
2. **Public/County Engagement**
 - Schedule workshop with County Council to identify and evaluate public land opportunities for partnership projects.
 - Solicit community feedback in public fora regarding proposed sites.
3. **Initiate Staff Work**
 - Direct staff to begin drafting code changes (zoning diagnostic, permitting reform, density and unit type allowances).
 - Prepare draft of inclusionary zoning ordinance for potential public hearing.
4. **Budget Planning**
 - Begin consideration of:
 - Development review software funding.
 - Housing coordinator position (possible shared cost with county).
 - Budgeting for strategic use of incentives (payment in lieu of taxes, fee abatements).
5. **Community Outreach**
 - Begin work on outreach materials (landing page, myth-dispelling information).
 - Plan for neighborhood/town hall meetings to gather feedback.

4. Follow-Up

- **December 15, 2025 Workshop (4:30 PM):**
 - Review/discuss remaining four pillars.
 - Continue questions and council feedback.
- **Public Hearing(s):**
 - Schedule public hearing for consideration of inclusionary zoning ordinance (draft already reviewed by Planning Commission).
- **Future Steps:**
 - Keep under review: holistic support for new residents (e.g., homeowner education).
 - Maintain focus on lowest-earning residents and supportive housing needs in future discussions.

Meeting adjourned to prepare for Council Meeting at 5:30 PM.

Respectfully submitted,

Kathy M. Ruf, Town Clerk

Town Council Meeting Summary

Date: November 17, 2025 **Time:** 5:30 p.m. **Location:** Council Chambers, 14 S Harrison Street

Present: President Don Abbatiello, Councilmembers Ms. Curry, Mr. Rankin, Dr. Montgomery, Rev. Davis. Also, present was the Town Manager Mr. Andy Kitzrow, Town Attorney Ms. Sharon VanEmburch, Chief of Police Alan Lowrey, Town Engineer Mr. Rick VanEmburch, Director of Planning Mr. Miguel Salinas and Town Clerk Ms. Kathy Ruf. Mayor Cook was excused.

Opening

- **Call to order** at 5:31 p.m. by President Abbatiello with opening prayer and remarks by Ms. Curry, focusing on gratitude, unity, and community well-being.
 - **Pledge of Allegiance** led by Ms. Curry.
-

Approval of Minutes

- **Minutes approved** from:
 - November 3, 2025, Comprehensive Zoning and Subdivision Amendments Review Workshop.
 - November 3, 2025, Council Meeting.
 - Upon motion by Dr. Montgomery, seconded by Rev. Davis and carried unanimously, the minutes were approved.
-

Main Topics Discussed

1. Town Manager's Report and Announcements

- **Community Events:**
 - Recent "ToE/Jam" event was successful, allowing engagement with public works equipment and fire department demonstrations (notably a 100ft fire truck ladder experience). Public Works and organizer Mike Dickerson was thanked.
 - **Annual Waterfowl Festival:** Took place the past weekend—gorgeous weather, possibly record-breaking attendance. High praise for Town staff, volunteers, and safety teams.
 - **Upcoming Events:**
 - Christmas lights installation underway; lighting ceremony planned for **Wednesday, November 19.**
 - Easton Police Department Community Police Academy is being planned—details to come.
 - **Downtown Parking Workshop:** Scheduled for **December 1, 2025, at 4:30 PM** (with partners "Slice" present for presentation and public input).
 - **Planning Commission Public Hearing on Comprehensive Plan:** Set for **December 9, 2025, at 6:00 PM**, with likely continuation on December 15.
 - Internal town holiday party in early December, invitations forthcoming.
-

2. Parks & Recreation Annual Plan Presentation

- **Presented By:** Advisory Board Mike Brophy and Tom Klein along with Parks & Recreation Director Ms. Gould and Town Engineer Rick VanEmburch.
- **Plan Requirements:**
 - Mandated annual plan per town code Article 4, Section 2.15A; tied to a 3–5 year strategic plan (document submitted electronically).

- Board includes six members; listed with gratitude to staff for support.
- **Plan Features:**
 - Acts as an operating guide with performance goals and timelines.
 - Emphasis on creating new programs, events, and partnerships with other town and county entities.
 - Board regularly visits and reviews 35 parks (over 300 acres) and 3–4 miles of trails in Easton.
 - Facilities, locations, and amenities comprehensively listed within the document.
 - Monthly meetings on the fourth Tuesday at 5:00 PM, open for public participation.
- **2026 Plan Highlights:**
 - Specific goals outlined on pages 5–6 of the plan, to be achieved by November 2026.
 - Added measurable benchmarks for accountability.
- **Discussion Points:**
 - **Positive Feedback:** Appreciation for new amenities at Matthewstown Run Park (notably the new swing set installed after over two decades).
 - **Community Tournaments:** A desire to attract more sports tournaments to Easton for economic and community visibility.
 - **Upcoming Events:**
 - **Youth Field Day Summit:** Scheduled for **Saturday, November 22, 2025, at Idlewild Park from 12:00 PM – 3:30 PM.** Collaboration with local schools and colleges, with activities including “Capture the Flag.”
 - Ribbon cutting at Golton Park tentatively set for **Thursday, December 11, 2025** (time TBA).
 - Expansion of youth and family programs in 2026; new flag football programming planned.
 - Attention to parking concerns at John Ford Park, Moton Park (possible Talbot County schools’ partnership for overflow).
 - **Budget & Capital Projects:**
 - Major potential project: seeking \$1.5 million in the Governor Moore’s proposed budget for improvements at Woodland Park (rails, trails, and parking).
 - Intention to aggressively pursue grant funding, especially via DNR, and use Town of Easton’s in-kind matches.
 - Possibility of adding part-time staffing for programming support in future budgets.
 - Disc Golf: Working with a community applicant to introduce disc golf at John Ford Park. Plan for tournaments and clinics in spring 2026; seeking \$10,000 in fundraising/matching.
 - Continued interest in eventual additions to large parks (ex. splash pad at John Ford Park).
 - **Partnerships:** Discussion of existing and possible partnerships with the YMCA, BAM, County Young Professionals, and private venues such as the new indoor sports complex near the airport (recently toured).
 - **Parking:** Efforts to expand parking at North Easton Park, especially on event days.
- **Plan Approval:**
 - First meeting for implementation set for **Tuesday, November 25, 2025, at 5:00 PM.**
- Upon motion by Ms. Curry, seconded by Dr. Montgomery and carried unanimously, the Parks and Recreation 2026 Plan was approved as presented.

3. Financials – Review of Invoices

- **Invoices Presented:** October 1–29, 2025.
- **Total Amount:** \$2,759,073.41
- Upon motion by Ms. Curry, seconded by Mr. Rankin and carried unanimously, the invoices were approved.

4. Public Participation and Comments

a. Rewilding & Environmental Initiatives – Erin Dawson

- **Subject:** Proposal for "rewilding" grassy/bare areas in Talbot County via native plants, trees, and shrubs.
 - Benefits: Reduced mowing, fertilizer, and water costs; supports birds, butterflies; addresses stormwater and chemical runoff; enhances resilience to sea rise and saltwater intrusion.
 - Shared list of native species suitable for these projects; offered hard copies to council.
 - Recommended exceptions to grass height limits for "rewilded" sites.
 - Suggested consideration of native plantings in Idlewild Park and new development projects.
 - Encouraged inclusion of amphibian and wetland conservation in planning.
 - Recognized recent environmental education/community events, like the Chesapeake Mermaid.
 - **Action Taken:** List of native species provided to the Town Engineer Mr. VanEmburch for review.
-

5. Committee Reports

a. Talbot County Economic Development Commission – Dr. Montgomery

- Reviewed newly developed strategic plan; noted surprise at county's intention to establish a "North Easton Innovation District" entirely within Easton without prior town input.
- Highlighted the need for improved communication between town and county on economic development matters.
- Offered to share the draft strategic plan with interested council members.

b. Talbot County Senior Task Force – Council Representative Mr. Rankin

- Task force convened (first meeting: Thursday, November 13, 2025).
 - Focus: Recommendations to address senior homelessness, food insecurity, and transportation issues; final recommendations due to county council by June 2026.
 - Emphasis on urgency due to approaching winter and extent of senior homelessness; intent to provide ongoing council updates.
-

6. Items by Members of the Council

- **General Committee/Councilor Remarks:**
 - Multiple expressions of thanks to those involved with the Waterfowl Festival—staff, volunteers, residents for their patience, and special recognition of successful transportation and parking management.
 - Gratitude to presenters of recent major studies and task forces (Attainable Housing Task Force).
 - Encouragement to community to give back for Thanksgiving, especially supporting those in need.
 - Warm holiday wishes for Thanksgiving.
 - Personal note from the Council President Abbatiello in memory of his father's birthday.
-

1. Upcoming Meetings

- **Downtown Parking Workshop:** December 1, 2025, at 4:30 PM (with “Slice” partners presenting).
 - **Planning Commission Public Hearing (Comprehensive Plan):** December 9, 2025, at 6:00 PM, with anticipated continuation on December 15.
 - **Youth Field Day Summit:** November 22, 2025, Idlewild Park noon–3:30 PM.
 - **Golton Park Ribbon Cutting:** Tentative for December 11, 2025 (details to follow).
 - **Parks and Rec Board Meeting:** November 25, 2025, at 5:00 PM (start implementation of approved plan).
 - **Senior Task Force:** Meets monthly; next report due around June 2026.
 - **Internal Holiday Party:** Early December, invitations/details forthcoming.
 - **Christmas Lights:** Lighting event planned for Wednesday, November 19, 2025 (confirmation needed).
-

Adjournment

- Meeting concluded with closing acknowledgments and holiday wishes. At 6:15 p.m., upon motion by Rev. Davis, seconded by Dr. Montgomery and carried unanimously, President Abbatiello adjourned the regularly scheduled meeting.

- Respectfully submitted,

-
- Kathy M. Ruf, Town Clerk