

Code Revision Workshop

Date: February 16, 2026 **Time:** 4:30 p.m. followed by a scheduled meeting at 5:30 p.m.

Location: Council Chambers, Easton Town Office, 14 S Harrison Street, Easton.

Attendees: Present were: Mayor Megan JM Cook, President Don Abbatiello, Councilmembers Ms. Maureen Curry, Mr. Robert Rankin, Dr. David Montgomery, and Rev. Elmer Davis. Also, present were the Town Attorney Ms. Sharon VanEmburch, Chief of Police Alan Lowrey, Town Engineer Rick VanEmburch and Town Clerk Ms. Kathy Ruf.

Focus: Revision of Chapters 1–8 of the Town Code

Main Topics Discussed

1. Overview of Revision Process and Document Formatting

- The Town Attorney Ms. VanEmburch discussed revisions.
- A redline version of the Town Code was used; color coding was explained:
 - Green: Material moved but unchanged.
- Significant portions of perceived changes are due to reorganization, not substantive edits.
- Ongoing formatting, renumbering for consistency throughout.

2. Chapter 1: General Provisions and Penalties

- **Primary Focus:** Penalties section
 - State law now allows up to \$5,000 per infraction; the code previously set fines at \$100 (first citation), \$200 (subsequent).
 - Proposed: Initial infraction up to \$1,000 (lower than state max), repeated violations up to \$5,000.
 - Discussion about adopting a schedule of fines (by future resolution) to structure penalties by type/severity of municipal infraction:
 - Need for transparency, continuity, and to avoid arbitrary fines.
 - Council desire for a summary/table showing minimums/maximums for each violation category.
 - Agreement on the importance of adopting a schedule alongside the new code, likely by summer 2026.
 - Clarification that most violations are municipal infractions; very few misdemeanors remain.

3. Chapter 2: Boards, Committees, and Council Salaries

- **Reorganization:** All Boards compiled/placed together; references to where other Boards are defined elsewhere (Planning, Board of Appeals).
- **Language adjustments:** Mayor/Council power to create task forces, committees; new uniform provisions for Board member removal (borrowed from other jurisdictions).
- **Council Salaries:**

- No change in numbers proposed yet; opportunity given to discuss/study compensation.
 - Staff collecting data from similar jurisdictions: population, budget size, pay scales.
 - Council largely agrees they are under-compensated; last pay raise was in 1999.
 - Adjusted for inflation, council pay should be almost double the current rate.
 - Past practice: Increases only effective after next election cycle due to state constitutional/charter restrictions (can't raise own pay during current term).
 - Discussion about possible formation of a study committee, staff-driven data, or independent board; consensus for staff to provide detailed comparative data on similar towns.
 - Noted possible anomalies, e.g., different elected officials' pay during transition years.
- **Department Heads Appointments:**
 - Director of Parks and Recreation was the only departmental director listed as “appointed” in code; proposal to standardize this so only traditional municipal appointments (Town Manager, Clerk, Town Engineer, Town Attorney, Chief of Police, Finance Officer) remain as such.
 - Grandfathering current Director (insurance & benefits unaffected); new hires post-update will follow new policy.
 - Discussion on which positions are appointed; current practice reviewed; no substantive changes for other departments.
- **Board/Committee Structure and Membership:**
 - Removal of excessive specificity (e.g., meeting months); Boards required to meet quarterly.
 - Reporting & delegation streamlined: Council to funnel directives through Mayor/Town Manager.
 - Residency requirements discussed:
 - Most Boards do not currently require residency; exceptions (e.g., Utilities Board: majority residency required).
 - Agreement to consider language giving preference/requirement for majority town residents on boards (w/ flexibility for non-resident expertise).
 - Possibility of setting minimum percentages (e.g., two-thirds residents), preference language, or explicit qualifications vs. residency.
 - Consistency across Boards:
 - Variability exists in Board sizes, term lengths; most are 3-year terms, but sizes and alternates differ.
 - No recommendation to standardize size/terms unless desired by council.
 - Board compensation:

- Noted language inconsistency regarding compensation; most boards serve without pay (except minor perks like meals).

4. Procurement Policy Update

- **Increase of purchase threshold** requiring quotes: Proposed rise from \$5,000 to \$10,000 for efficiency and inflation.
 - Current \$5,000 threshold unchanged for a long period; upper limits previously adjusted.
- **Anti-favoritism language** added, emphasizing equitable vendor selection even with higher authority to approve expenditures.
- **Explicit requirements** for emergency/sole-source purchases and for council approval of unbudgeted or budget-exceeding expenses.
- **Town Manager empowered** to create a detailed purchasing policy for procedural clarity (to supplement general Code provisions).
- **Clarification:** Some provisions deleted, relocated, or modified for clarity and alignment with current practice.

5. Ethics, Code Enforcement, and Administrative Changes

- **Ethics section:** Moved to its own chapter; only minor textual changes (due to need for state approval on substantive edits).
- **Code Enforcement:** Minor cleanup (e.g., referencing outside inspection consultants), mostly format and procedural clarifications.
- **Custody/disposition of abandoned or seized property:** Minimal updates—replaces references (e.g., finance officer replaces town clerk in procedures).
- **Economic Development Commission (EDC):** Now explicitly tasked with organizing public events.
- **Elections and Campaign Finance:**
 - Moved to their own chapter; little content change except formatting.
 - **Absentee Ballot Procedure:**
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 - Debate over whether to allow in-person pick-up, as opposed to requiring mailing only. Staff supports current method (following state: allows both, mailing cutoff one week before election, in-person up to election day); rejected proposal to MAIL-ONLY.
 - Proposal to accept mailed ballots postmarked by election day and received before 4:00 PM the following day (when final vote count occurs).
 - Discussion of safeguards (e.g., identity verification, application process, threat of application fraud/misuse—debated, no current ID requirement, but potential for future rule if council desires).
 - Ongoing consideration of further changes, with room for more Council feedback.
- **Administrative Search Warrant chapter unchanged.**

- **Deleted chapters:** Civilian Defense (outdated) and Filling Stations (replaced by new ethics chapter).

6. Animals and Related Regulations (Chapter 4)

- **County animal control:** Formal shift to Talbot County enforcement for dog licensing, at-large, etc. (town no longer collects dog or poultry fees).
 - **Retained sections:** Town retains prohibitions (e.g., chickens running at large, no roosters—ROOSTER BAN is new, per community complaint).
 - **Kennels:** Removed redundant/obsolete licensing language already covered by zoning; basic kennel operation/complaint provisions retained.
 - **Code Enforcement Appeals:** Proposal to remove the Council as appellate body for nuisance/animal control decisions (e.g., poultry, swine complaints). Appeals re-routed to the Board of Appeals per general Code process—avoiding Council involvement in individual animal-related disputes, except in specific zoning or planning situations.
- **Bikes:** No current changes proposed; expected later (esp. for e-bikes) following stakeholder input.
- **Minor technical updates** (e.g., deleting references to obsolete chapters, e.g., plumbing).

7. Anticipated Future Process and Next Steps

- **Workshops planned:** Four total, each covering manageable segments of the code (~1 hour each).
- **Adoption Timeline:** Aiming for adoption of updated code by summer 2026.
- **Opportunity for Additional Edits:** Council and staff invited to review and suggest further changes throughout the process.

Action Items

- **Fine Schedule:**
 - Staff to develop and present a proposed schedule of fines (minimums/maximums for each category of municipal infraction), to be adopted alongside the revised code.
- **Council Salary Study:**
 - Staff to collect and present comparative data from peer jurisdictions (population, budget, pay scales) for council review before finalizing salary changes.
- **Board Residency and Qualification Language:**
 - Staff to draft language establishing preferred/required residency percentages for boards, balancing with necessity for specialized expertise where applicable.
- **Purchasing Policy:**
 - Town Manager to develop a detailed internal purchasing/procurement policy consistent with the revised code.
- **Absentee Ballot Handling:**
 - Possible update to Code to allow mailed ballots received by 4:00 PM the day after election if postmarked by election day. Council feedback requested.

- Staff to continue considering identity verification and ballot application procedures as warranted; further council direction invited.
- **Bicycle/E-Bike Regulations:**
 - Staff to continue stakeholder engagement and prepare future recommendations for Code update regarding bicycles and e-bikes.
- **Code Consistency Review:**
 - Review board member appointment terms, sizes, compensation, and residency. Standardization only if Council directs; decision pending.
- **Grandfathering Current Appointed Positions:**
 - Ensure current department heads retain existing benefits/appointments during transition; clarify in language if needed.
- **Council Members to Review Drafts:**
 - Members to review changes in detail and suggest further modifications or request clarifications before final code adoption.

Follow-Up

- **Subsequent Workshops:** Three further workshops to complete review of all chapters.
- **Salary Data and Fine Schedule:** Expected in advance of decision/adoption (before summer 2026).
- **Board Structure Language:** Staff to propose draft language for Council review.
- **Election/Absentee Ballot Policy:** Pending further council input; possibly resolved before Code adoption.
- **Council and staff to continue feeding back any issues or requests for further detail as redline revision progresses.**

Key Points of Appreciation

- Council expressed thanks for Ms. VanEmburch's (and staff's) significant work in organizing and rationalizing the Code, bringing it up-to-date for 2026.

At 5:17 p.m., President Abbatiello adjourned the workshop and recessed until the regularly scheduled meeting.

Town Council Meeting

Date: February 16, 2026, **Time:** 5:30 p.m. **Location:** Council Chambers, Easton Town Office, 14 S Harrison Street, Easton.

Attendees: Present were: Mayor Megan JM Cook, President Don Abbatiello, Councilmembers Ms. Maureen Curry, Mr. Robert Rankin, Dr. David Montgomery, and Rev. Davis. Also, present were the Town Attorney Ms. Sharon VanEmburch, Chief of Police Alan Lowrey, Town Engineer Rick VanEmburch and Town Clerk Ms. Kathy M. Ruf.

I. Opening Proceedings

- **Call to order:** At 5:30 p.m., President Abbatiello called the regularly scheduled meeting to order.
- **Opening remarks:** Meeting opened with remarks and the Pledge of Allegiance by Council Member Robert Rankin.
 - Shared excerpt from his grandfather's 1967 commencement address, "Roots of the Tree of Liberty", emphasizing the importance of citizenship, civic engagement, and the vitality of local/state governance.
 - Set a tone recognizing the role and value of community participation.

II. Approval of Previous Meeting Minutes

- **Date Approved:** February 2, 2026
- **Action:** Upon motion by Rev. Davis seconded by Ms. Curry and carried unanimously, minutes of the February 2, 2026 meeting were approved as written.

III. Main Topics Discussed

A. Municipal and Mayor's Updates (Mayor Cook)

1. Team Solidarity

- **Employee Welcome:** Community, public safety, and utility departments came together last week to welcome back a team member seriously injured in December.

2. Budget Workshops

- **Scheduled Dates:** March 25, March 26, April 2, 2026.
- **Council to Receive Budget:** Early March.
- **Department Schedules:** To be sent once finalized.

3. Infrastructure Projects

- **Train Station Roof:** Near completion. Delayed due to weather, expected to finish next week.

4. Upcoming Community Events & Dates

- **Comp Plan:** Planning Commission discussion this week, with eventual council review.
- **St. Patrick's Day Parade:** March 17, 2026; council/leadership to coordinate cart/walking options.
- **Little League Baseball Opening:** March 28, 2026
- **Softball Opening:** April 10, 2026
- **Run/Walk Group Start:** April 15, 2026 (collaboration with YMCA, hospital, Talbot Thrive)
- **Kickball League Start:** April 22, 2026

5. Board Appointment

- **Talbot County Park and Recreation Board:** Upon motion by Dr. Montgomery, seconded by Rev. Davis, Michael Brophy was confirmed as the Town's representative to the County's Parks and Recreation Advisory Board, replacing Mr. Tom Klein.

B. Town Manager Update (Mr. Kitzrow)

- **Internal Bid Review:** Only one item (Choptank Turf for pest management/fertilizer), fell below threshold, so contract approved internally—no council action needed.

C. Town Attorney (Ms. VanEmburch)

- No report or action requested by council or community.

D. Police Department Update (Chief Lowrey)

1. Employee Promotions

- **Promotions Recognized:**
 - Sergeant Joseph Shinault (formerly corporal, SWAT team)
 - Corporal Anthony Cullins (patrol/K9 officer, drone operator, SWAT)
 - Corporal Frank “Norm” Sova (detective bureau, drone operator, transitioning to patrol)

2. 2025 Department Metrics

- **Calls for Service:** 22,148
- **Community Engagement:** 17,079 events
- **Patrol Checks:** 3,900
- **Neighborhood Checks:** 189
- **Foot Patrols:** 562
- **School Resource Officer (SRO):** Program for St. Peter and Paul Elementary launched; plans to expand to high school next month. Officer Proctor is currently staffed at SSPP.

3. Staffing/Retention Issue

- **Concern:** All command staff could retire immediately, which would create major gaps.
- **Budget Request:** Chief Lowrey asked for consideration for an enhanced retirement benefit program to retain staff; equipment needs for the coming fiscal year.
- **Council Response:** Expressed full support for department efforts and community safety.

E. Easton Economic Development Corporation (EEDC) – Holly Dakarski

1. Events Planning

- **St. Patrick’s Parade:** Signups open.
- **Fire & Ice:** Moved to coming weekend (due to weather/business requests), live carvings, fire dancers, music; no street/parking closures; 60+ sculptures and multiple family activities.
- **Easter Egg Hunt:** April 4, 2026, expanded location due to crowding (West Street Road closure requested).
- **Taste of Easton:** April 26–May 2, 2026; ticketed event, followed by Restaurant Week and Mayday.

2. Business & Community Projects

- **Creative Placemaking/Small Area Plan (East End):**
 - Past meetings delayed due to weather; rescheduled for March.
 - Expansion of east entry lighting.
 - Upcoming meeting involving arts organizations and leadership to discuss placemaking findings.
- **Retail Assessment:**

- Chesapeake Group (Howard) to present retail/housing report at Dover Station (date pending).
- **Merchant Relations:**
 - Parking improvements and waste management discussions ongoing with downtown merchants.
- **Visitor Center:**
 - New accessible entrance signage, open 9 a.m.–5 p.m., seven days/week (unstaffed lobby).
 - New part-time staffing position to be posted.
 - \$47,000 MHAA grant for outfitting (budget constraints); working with Public Works for exhibits and installations.
 - Fire & Ice staffing for visitor engagement.
- **Data Collection:**
 - Placer AI subscription renewed for downtown foot traffic analytics.
 - Ongoing event-influenced in-person surveys for council/event decision support.

3. Funding/Sponsorships

- **Fiscal/Annual Sponsors:** Now match fiscal years with town/state (24 annual sponsors, several three-year commitments).
- **Grants/Sponsorships:** 32% of funding; conference sponsorship fundraising noted.

4. Upcoming Business Openings

- **Accanto Restaurant:** Ribbon cutting February 18 at 4:00 p.m.
- **Preston Toyota of Easton:** Grand opening February 19 at 11:00 a.m.

5. Mistletoe Hall Business Park Update (w/ Miguel Salinas and Holly DeKarske)

- **EDA Grant (2018):** \$2.3 million (town-matched), created infrastructure and 13 subdivided commercial lots.
- **Current Occupancy:**
 - Total Home (Lot 1)
 - Vetagro (Combined lots, under construction, Northern Italy-based)
 - Easton Volunteer Fire Department (Lot 8)
 - Carrion Electric and Blue Crab Storage
 - Remaining lots marketed; some grouped for larger applicants
- **Jobs/Grant Compliance:**
 - No explicit jobs number in grant, but required to document private investment and job creation/retention.
 - 3, 6, and 9-year EDA report deadlines; next/final: August 2027–early 2028 (expectation to be fully built-out or show impact).
 - Lot status, job expansion commitments from new/existing businesses discussed.
 - Approval Process: Application, committee review/scoring, council approval; planning/zoning and covenants also apply.

F. Easton Utilities Report: Diesel Fuel Spill Incident (John Horner, CEO/President)

1. Incident Overview

- **Date of Incident:** Discovered February 8, 2026 (valve malfunction likely started Feb 7).
- **Total Diesel Fuel Spilled:** Approx. 10–15 gallons, with about 5–10 gallons entering stream.
- **Immediate Cause:** Valve failure during emergency generator use (due to regional cold and grid demand).
- **Initial Response Issues:**
 - Operators notified supervision but failed to report to senior leadership or MDE as required.
 - First external notifications came from public (smell/fuel reports) and social media activity; senior leadership informed late morning February 10.

2. Response, Communication, and Investigation

- **Cleanup Measures:** Absorbent materials deployed; BP Environmental contracted for mitigation; Maryland Department of Environment (MDE) and Department of Natural Resources (DNR) engaged.
- **Wildlife Impact:** 7 dead birds (5 geese, 2 ducks); others possibly affected.
- **Timeline Clarification:** Initial misinformation on incident timing corrected; public apology issued.
- **Community/Interagency Support:** Multiple agencies (local emergency, PD, FD, MDE, DNR, Waterfowl Festival, etc.) commended for rapid, coordinated response.

3. Remediation & Accountability

- **Continuous Remediation:** Ongoing with guidance from MDE; soil cleanup completed, absorbent barriers monitored.
- **Plan for Future:**
 1. Technical upgrades—modern controls, redundant alarms, enhanced containment.
 2. Improved internal communication, leadership training, and tightening of emergency/corrective procedures.
 3. Enhanced partnership with local environmental groups (e.g., Waterfowl Festival).
- **Transparency Commitment:** Full public updates and regular reporting to continue.

4. Community/Council Response

- Gratitude expressed for candor, leadership, and Utilities' swift corrective action.
- Additional technical questions fielded:
 - **Extent of Impact:** Contained past the second pond, did not reach Tred Avon River.
 - **Readiness for Events:** Clean-up expected to finish before major festivals; no known fish impact.
 - **Fuel Use Context:** 100 tanker trucks of diesel used over two weeks of generator operation, yielding \$50 savings per household last month.
 - **Investigation of Incident Causes:** Valve failure not definitively linked to high generator run-time.
- **Fire Department Statement (Assistant Chief Daryl Caldwell):**
 - Provided detailed emergency response timeline and procedural overview.
 - Confirmed incident contained efficiently with cooperation from multiple agencies; MDE assumed leadership for environmental response.

G. Legislations

1. Annexation Resolution No. 6216 & Ordinance No. 849

- **Scope:** 36.52 acres (Norris E. Taylor Contractors, Jeffrey H. Goodman, Patricia T. Goodman) on east side of Ocean Gateway, adjacent to East Kennedy, Reagan, Nixon Drives.
- **Status:** Pending response from property owner; will be discussed again at future council meeting.

2. Invoices

- **Total Approved:** Upon motion by Dr. Montgomery, seconded by Ms. Curry, invoices totaling \$1,697,154.29 were approved.

H. Public Participation and Comments

- **Assistant Chief Caldwell Statement:** (See above).
- No additional public comments registered.

I. Committee Reports and Council Comments

1. Board Recruitment

- Council President Abbatiello encouraged residents to serve on various town boards; information and forms available on town website.

2. Council Updates

- **Community Event Reminders:** Accanto restaurant opening, Preston Toyota opening, Fire & Ice event.
- **Recognition:** Congratulations to promoted police staff; thanks to Fire Department for annual event invitation.
- **Thanks, and Appreciation:** Multiple council members commended Easton Utilities, Police, Fire Department, and local leaders for service and responses.

3. Black History Month Remarks (Reverend Davis)

- Emphasized the inseparability of African American and American history.
- Shared gratitude for ancestors, local community, and ongoing quest for justice, opportunity, and inclusion.

IV. Closed Session

- At 6:53 p.m., upon motion by Mr. Rankin, seconded by Dr. Montgomery, President Abbatiello moved into Closed Session for General Provisions Article §3-305(b)(4) to consider a matter that concerns the proposal for a business or industrial organization to locate, expand or remain in the state.
- At 7:26 p.m., upon motion by Mr. Rankin, seconded by Rev. Davis, and carried unanimously, President Abbatiello moved into Open Session.

V. Adjournment

- At 7:27 p.m., upon motion by Ms. Curry, seconded by Dr. Montgomery, President Abbatiello adjourned the regularly scheduled meeting.

Respectfully submitted,

Kathy M. Ruf, Town Clerk

TOWN OF EASTON, MARYLAND CLOSED EXECUTIVE SESSION

TIME & PLACE: February 16, 2026; 6:53 PM; Easton Town Council Chambers.

PURPOSE: Article § 3-305(b)(4) to consider a matter that concerns the proposal for a business or industrial organization to locate, expand, or remain in the State.

PRESENT: Mayor Megan JM Cook, Council President Don Abbatiello, Councilmembers Maureen Curry, Robert Rankin, David Montgomery, Rev. Elmer Davis.

Also, present was Town Attorney Sharon VanEmburch, Town Manager Andy Kitzrow, Town Clerk Kathy Ruf, Director of Planning and Zoning Miguel Salinas and EEDC Executive Director Holly DeKarske.

VOTE TO CLOSE: At 6:53 p.m., upon motion by Mr. Rankin, seconded by Dr. Montgomery and carried unanimously following a roll call vote, President Abbatiello moved into Closed Session.

- Holly DeKarske, Miguel Salinas were present to discuss job creation/retention targets for real estate projects. No decisions taken; further updates pending.

At 7:26 p.m., upon motion by Mr. Rankin, seconded by Rev. Davis and carried unanimously, the President of the Council adjourned the Closed Session and moved into Open Session.

Respectfully submitted,

Kathy M. Ruf, Town Clerk

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