

Budget Hearing Workshop

Date: March 26, 2026, Time: 5:00 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, and Town Clerk Ms. Kathy M. Ruf.

- Primary participants included Department Directors/Staff: Rick Farr (HR), Russell Miles (EVFD), Tom Diem (Building Dept.), Miguel Salinas (Planning & Zoning), Scott Messick (IT). Chief Lowrey (EPD),

Main Topics Discussed

1. Human Resources (HR) Budget Review (Rick Farr)

a. Employee Engagement and Morale Initiatives

- Annual Employee Christmas Party: \$27,000 allocated; continued success in consolidating department parties.
- Quarterly Promotional Breakfasts: \$15,000 for breakfasts and seasonal cookouts; cited as effective morale builders.
- Discussion Point: Ms. Curry suggested reviving the all-boards & commissions annual gathering to foster relations between administration and volunteers.

b. Employee Training & Leadership Development

- Training Budget: \$40,000 proposed for leadership and professional development, including quarterly leadership training, workshops on adaptive leadership, psychology of leadership, and collaborations with Easton Utilities.
- Succession Planning: Trainings have improved communication, staff readiness for promotions, and overall departmental collaboration.
- Council Input: Potential for Council representation at trainings was discussed. Members largely supported the initiative's impact on retention and staff morale.
- Retention: The turnover rate is reported at less than 2%.

c. Contractual Services – ADP

- ADP Utilization: Payroll, compliance training, onboarding, and job posting functions; ongoing for three years.
- Pay Scales Software: Decision made to not renew the \$17,000 system given existing staff skills.

d. Conferences and Certifications

- HR Conferences: \$7,500 for national/in-person conferences (SHRM, HR Law, ADP).
- SHRM Certification: Director and HR Generalist pursuing/maintaining certifications; required in-person attendance at some events.
- Travel: Three conferences per year for HR staff.

e. Other Operational Needs

- Equipment: Minimal non-capital equipment – new printer (\$750).

- Clothing Allowance: \$400 annually.
- Meetings & Memberships: SHRM membership (\$300), professional association dues.

f. Capital Requests

- HR Vehicle: Original request denied; existing “pool” vehicles available as needed.

2. Easton Volunteer Fire Department (EVFD) Budget (Russell Miles)

a. Capital and Operating Requests

- Department satisfaction: All requested items included as submitted; praised as “very generous.”
- Capital Maintenance:
 - Tower 61: \$15,000 for lighting rehab—now reclassified as general maintenance, not increased.
 - Turnout Gear: \$45,000, covering approximately five to six sets (\$7,000–\$8,000/set).
 - Hose Allotment: \$7,500, town’s portion of total replacement cost, supplemented by department funds.

b. Future Facility and Equipment Planning

- Station 60 Feasibility Study: Committee formed to assess renovation or replacement, factoring in equipment lifespan/compatibility and centrally favorable location.
- Timeline: Engine 68 due for replacement in 2032; anticipating \$1.2 million cost (previous comparable purchase: \$1.1 million recent, \$800,000 three years ago).
- Feasibility Study: Budget target to remain under \$80,000 (proposals up to \$140,000 discussed), to leverage best use of property from Creamery Lane to Aurora.
- Collaboration: Ongoing communications with Rick Van Enberg and Talbot County regarding infrastructure and property use.

c. Depreciation & Accounting

- Depreciation not budgeted in yearly operational budget; actuals shown for accounting purposes only.

3. Building Department / Code Enforcement & Rental Housing (Tom Diem)

a. Operating Budget

- Building Department: \$116,500 for operating accounts, no changes from mayoral review.
- Permitting: Large third-party inspection (hospital project) budgeting handled separately with clear revenue offset from permit fees (hospital inspection contracts total over \$1.1 million; town to net \$2.2–2.5 million in permit revenue through FY27).
- Staffing: Cross-training efforts ongoing; two new inspectors in six-month onboarding.

b. Capital Budget

- Vehicle Replacement: Deferred (T-84 replaced via internal vehicle reassignment from engineering); next replacement not anticipated until FY29.

- No major capital needs for FY27 for building or code.

c. Rental Housing / Code Enforcement (Tom Diem and Nick Ewing)

- Operating Increase: Slight increase to \$31,950; revenue expected to be \$249,000+ due to raised rental license fees.
- Inspection Cycle: Goal to inspect 100% of rentals every three years, moving toward every other year; 3,000+ units in town.
- Staffing: Two full-time (one in training) for rental inspection; one leading code enforcement.

d. Data & Ownership Discussion

- Rental Property Ownership: Data available via rental licenses and SDAT (state database), supporting potential analysis of landlord profiles and property management trends.
- Short-Term Rentals and LLC Ownership: Noted prevalence and methods for further research.

e. Workload & Staffing

- Permits: 15-year track record of permit growth (up to 1,824 last year, projected 1,950 for 2026).
- Succession/Training: Two inspectors in pipeline; anticipated turnover is being proactively managed.
- ADA Compliance: Noted need for contracted professional assistance (\$20,000) for accessibility plan review and townwide right-of-way transition plan (to be added to the final budget).

4. Planning and Zoning (Miguel Salinas)

a. Operating Budget

- Internship Program: New ask for a paid intern (\$5,000/summer; \$16/hr.); likely partnership with Salisbury University. Part of broader move to formalize internship pipelines townwide.
- Promotional Activities: Increase by \$10,000 to better fund required public hearing advertising, reflecting trends of higher publication costs.
- Meetings/Conferences: \$10,000 for staff certification and professional development (AICP, etc.); staff attends national and online trainings.

b. Capital Projects

- Dover Triangle Park: Contingent on grant funding; design/engineering and stormwater management for park redevelopment.
- Zoning Code Update: Post-comprehensive plan, consideration for zoning ordinance overhaul or form-based overlay; possible vendor to be selected.
- E-Code Implementation: Discussion of acquiring searchable, cloud-based code management system; improves both staff and public access, streamlines updates and provides pop-up definitions. \$25,000 implementation, with ongoing annual fee.
- Transportation Plan: Funding for comprehensive transportation planning in two phases—existing network assessment and future forecasting (20-year outlook); sets policy and infrastructure needs.

- Northeast Easton Master Plan: \$75,000 ask, to be matched by Talbot County; creates strategic land-use and infrastructure plan for area affected by hospital/airport/industrial development. Town will lead consultant selection.

c. Process Improvement/Software

- OpenGov & Other Solutions: Ongoing evaluation of forward-facing permitting/process software (OpenGov, SmartSheet, etc.); \$200,000+ available from carryover funds; aim to enhance transparency and tracking for applicants and staff.

5. Information Technology (IT) (Scott Messick)

a. Operational Budget

- Software Consolidation: All major software licensing rolled into IT accounts (Civic, Central Square, Laserfiche, Virtua, etc.).
- JumpCloud: Proposed for user/device/cloud management (\$23,700), set to replace a \$9,500 prior device management line.
- Cybersecurity Initiatives: New penetration testing and vulnerability scanning per audit requirements and best practice.
- Training: \$7,000 training budget (mostly used for firewall training, obtained at no charge this year through contract).

b. Capital Budget

- PC Replacement: \$36,000 for ongoing three- to four-year replacement cycle for staff computers. Macs run longer replacement.
- Disposal Policy: Machines are stripped of hard drives and not resold.

6. Easton Police Department (EPD) (Chief Lowrey and Deputy Chief Wright)

a. Operational Budget

- Increase: Modest year-over-year increase; added funds for intensive tactical training, especially active shooter response.
- Staffing Account Adjustments: Salaries reallocated for transparency within divisions (admin, patrol, criminal investigations).
- Dispatch Contract: \$400,000 for Calvert County; EPD is sole paying department due to higher call volume/dedicated dispatchers.
- Pensions/OPEB: Pension fund changes funded in budget, pending JIC approval; new plan closer to "LEOPS" (state police retirement), but not identical. OPEB funded at \$250,000.
- Retention & Recruitment: Retirement changes primarily to aid retention as command staff near eligibility.
- Bonuses: Spanish-language bonuses (\$12,000 for four officers; open to other departments). College tuition assistance utilized (most recently by cadet).
- Diversity Initiatives: Female cadet moving to recruit class.

b. Capital Budget

- Major Requests: Prioritized and approved:
 - Plate Carriers: SWAT team needs expiring equipment replaced.

- Canine Vehicles: Two Tahoes (\$200,000, for 2015 and 2017 vehicles being retired), larger for SWAT/K9/drones.
- Rifles/Simunition: For remaining patrol officers, training needs.
- Items Not Approved: SWAT armored vehicle, EOTech night vision, additional patrol vehicles (discussed option to use \$205,000 in PD impact fees for two additional patrol fleet vehicles).
- Night Vision Equipment: Discussion on federal grant prospects, need for parity among SWAT team following sheriff's office upgrades.

c. Patrol Vehicles

- Replacement Strategy: Newer officers may receive older vehicles based on seniority. Three new vehicles estimated at \$273,000 (outfitted). Prioritized after K9 vehicles if additional funds become available.

d. General Notes

- Drone Program: Expanded to interior/exterior, including VR interface and in-house drone development.
- SWAT Van: Department still uses an older vehicle; regional options available for heavier equipment via Queen Anne's County.
- Salary Adjustments: New starting pay at \$66,000 (up from \$63,500), competitive with local agencies; will roll up through existing scales.
- Operational Savings: Some budget lines reduced to prioritize higher-need items (e.g., freezing a civilian position to fund benefit enhancements).

Action Items

- HR:
 - Ms. Curry suggested reinstating annual boards & commissions gathering.
 - Continue cross-departmental leadership training.
 - Maintain quarterly collaborative HR meetings with Easton Utilities.
- EVFD:
 - Conduct and fund (under \$80,000) a feasibility study for Station 60.
 - Track apparatus and facility replacement timelines (notably Engine 68 and firehouse).
 - Communicate with Talbot County on station presence/infrastructure.
- Building Department/Code Enforcement:
 - Add \$20,000 to contractual services for ADA plan review/external consulting.
 - Ongoing cross-training and staff upskilling in anticipation of potential workflow increases/inspection load.
 - Track rental property ownership trends for future policy review.
- Planning & Zoning:
 - Launch paid internship program for summer/semester roles.

- Pursue grant funding for Dover Triangle and confirm commitments for NE Easton Master Plan.
- Progress E-Code or similar searchable code platform; finalize proposal and funding.
- Move forward with comprehensive transportation plan.
- IT:
 - Implement JumpCloud suite, including phasing out duplicative device management line.
 - Complete planned PC replacements.
 - Integrate penetration/vulnerability testing for enhanced cybersecurity.
- EPD:
 - Finalize and implement new pension plan following JIC approval.
 - Monitor fuel cost trends; adjust if prolonged price increases impact the departments' large-volume users (notably PD).
 - Apply for necessary grants for technology (night vision, drones).
 - Use PD impact fees, if possible, to secure additional patrol vehicles.
 - Maintain ongoing diversity recruiting, language stipend, college assistance programs.
- All Departments:
 - Ongoing exploration of OpenGov or similar public-facing software solutions; coordinate multi-department user needs.
 - Review available carry-over and grant funding as final FY27 budget is prepared.
- Follow-Up / Next Steps
 - Salary Review: Next meeting to focus in detail on salary structures across departments, including PD.
 - Revenues, Miscellaneous Accounts, and Facilities: To be covered in the upcoming session.
 - Final Budget Approval: Inclusion of late requests (ADA consulting), capital and operational adjustments.
 - Software RFPs: Continued exploration/selection for public portal permitting and code solutions.
 - Potential Meetings: Scheduling coordination for facilities administration and revenues (noted conflicts for next Monday).

Respectfully submitted,

Kathy M. Ruf, Town Clerk

