

# Mathews board strikes cooperative tone

BY SHERRY HAMILTON ON JANUARY 10, 2024



*SHERRY HAMILTON / GAZETTE-JOURNAL* The Mathews County Board of Supervisors held its annual organizational meeting on Wednesday, Jan. 3, electing officers, adopting bylaws and a code of ethics, setting schedules, and making committee assignments. Shown, from left, wearing matching Blue Devil T-shirts in support of Mathews County Public Schools athletics, are Mike Walls, Dave Jones, chair Janice Phillips, vice chair Tim Doss, and Tom Bowen. The Mathews County Board of Supervisors held its 2024 organizational meeting last Wednesday, Jan. 3, unanimously electing Janice Phillips as chairman and Tim Doss as vice chair.

The revamped board, with three newly-elected members, sought to emphasize a spirit of cooperation, with all board members sporting Mathews Blue Devils "Together We Win" T-shirts and taking care to address each other respectfully.

After Phillips was elected chairman, former chair Dave Jones said, "It's been my pleasure to serve as chairperson this past year, and I hope that moving into this year, we come out successful. I believe we're putting a good person into the chair."

The board then presented Jones with a resolution of appreciation for his service.

Before the gavel was passed, supervisor Mike Walls requested an amendment to the agenda to add a closed session to discuss personnel matters in addition to an already-scheduled closed session to discuss 384 Old Ferry Road, the Hole in the Wall Waterfront Grill, a matter of ongoing concern and upcoming litigation.

However, county attorney Andrea Erard advised the board that the motion had to include more specific information about the reason for the closed session, with both Walls and then-chair Dave Jones questioning that advice.

Supervisor Tom Bowen said he didn't like closed sessions, "especially ones that end up in no action," and said that supervisors should, in the future, talk in advance with the county attorney to make sure that a closed session would be appropriate.

In response to a request for more information by Phillips about the reason for the closed session, Walls said he wanted to discuss two matters—the fact that the newly-appointed emergency services coordinator has a full-time job “across the water,” and that the board, during a meeting that Walls missed, had approved a significant increase in the county administrator’s severance package, from six months of pay to two years of pay.

“A \$330,000 severance package is absurd in a county of this size,” said Walls.

Bowen then expressed agreement with Walls’s request for a closed session, but Erard explained to the board that the Virginia Code section provided to justify the need for a closed session did not cover a discussion of the county administrator’s contract. The board then voted 3–2, with Walls and Jones dissenting, against holding a closed session.

Walls and Jones continued to press for a closed session, with Bowen suggesting that one be included on the agenda for the regular January meeting, to be held on Thursday, Jan. 18. Bowen then moved to delete the closed session from the agenda and make several other changes, and the board unanimously adopted the amended agenda.

### **Code of Ethics**

The board unanimously adopted its Code of Ethics after amending it at Doss’s request to include language saying that board members should conduct business professionally and respectfully.

## **Bylaws**

The board voted unanimously to table a vote on adoption of its bylaws until the regular meeting on Jan. 18. Bowen had requested a number of changes, including one that would allow for electronic participation in meetings under certain conditions, and Walls said he would like more time to study the suggested changes before voting on them.

## **Hole in the Wall committee**

At Bowen's suggestion, the board voted unanimously to disband the then-existing Hole in the Wall committee, which consisted of Walls and Jones, and to instead have Bowen talk with Hole in the Wall Waterfront Grill attorney Tommy Norment about a possible settlement of the issues involved.

Bowen explained while making his proposal that he believed Walls and Jones could no longer resolve the matter because they are defendants in the \$10 million lawsuit the restaurant has brought against the county. He said further that the county is "bleeding out in legal fees" and that the board should "come to a pause" in order to have an opportunity to look at the lawsuit and several other things that need to be addressed: the county's appeal of the Board of Zoning Appeals decision on Hole in the Wall, the structural safety of the restaurant, and the ongoing pump and haul expenses at the site.

"I don't see how we can progress on any one independently and have a good solution," he said. "We need a solution for all of them."

Walls and Jones both said they weren't concerned about the lawsuit against them, with Jones emphasizing that the number one issue is safety.

"I don't count frivolous lawsuits into my equation of public safety," Jones said.

Jones said further that the county isn't in a position to negotiate because the structure needs to conform to the floodplain ordinance.

"It's just a matter of who's going to pay for it," he said.

Bowen said he agreed that public safety is the number one priority, but that repairs to the structure are being delayed because of the litigation.

"The purpose is not to delay, but to expedite," he said. "This will allow us to approach the party to see if we can find a solution. If not, we go back to litigation."

The board also unanimously supported a motion by Bowen to have the county attorney talk with the county's outside legal counsel and see if they can come up with a way to minimize legal fees in the Hole in the Wall case.

### **Broadband Advisory Board**

The board held a discussion regarding a contract with broadband consultant Jeff Beekhoo. County Administrator Ramona Wilson

said the previous contract had a specific scope of work and was extended twice, up to Dec. 2022, but that there has been no contract with Beekhoo since then, and the scope of work has now been fulfilled. However, she said that, with funding from the Broadband Equity, Access and Deployment Program “coming down,” the broadband advisory board would like Beekhoo to continue. Wilson said she hopes the county’s IT staff can take on some of the tasks to reduce the cost of the contract, which has been \$150,000 annually.

Bowen emphasized that broadband is “essential in remaining competitive” and that “we have to get this right.”

Walls said that the county employees should be allowed to handle anything they can handle, and Jones agreed that the county has personnel in place to possibly handle the matter.

Doss said the county had added an IT position because it was difficult for one person to do the job, and with the county possibly receiving millions in grant funding, he’s concerned about the two employees having the time to handle it.

### **Looking toward the future**

The meeting ended with each supervisor making a statement about what he or she would like to accomplish in the coming four years.

“I think we all five want what is best,” said Bowen. “We won’t always agree, but if we listen to each other, we may learn to modify our opinion. We’re off to a good start.”

Bowen said the things he’d like the board to look into include municipal water for the village area that would serve all three schools and the restaurants, as well as issues in the schools and workforce housing. Mathews has many vacant older homes, he said, and there need to be incentives to encourage people to restore them. He said the comprehensive plan will be critical in developing goals, and he encouraged residents to submit applications to serve on boards and commissions.

Building the new firehouse and correcting issues in county-owned properties, particularly the schools, were the issues Doss raised that needed the board’s focus. He said the board needs to look into an Energy Performance Contract through the state as a way to save money and said that the county can successfully navigate challenges and still keep taxes as reasonable as possible by working as a team.

“My goal at the end of two years, when (Walls and Jones) are up for reelection is that the county will want them to run again because of the job that we do,” he said. “I have one goal—what’s best for Mathews County.”

Jones agreed that lack of municipal water is affecting the county’s growth, but said there are always challenges facing any board and that he sees “some divide.” But he said he hopes to have those issues resolved and move forward. He urged other board members to not believe everything they hear and to do their homework. As

far as the schools are concerned, Jones said he believes the new school superintendent will be “more transparent than we’re used to.”

“I hope if we have a disagreement, we disagree and move on and walk out with no animosity,” he said. “I’ll always have respect for you, no matter what the decision is.”

Walls said the board has “a big job in front of us,” that the last two years “haven’t been easy,” and that he looks forward to the next two years being easier.

“We have different personalities outside that door,” he said, “but when we come in, it should all be about Mathews County.”

Phillips said she was honored to have been elected chair of the board, and she hopes the board will work on school facilities and “really focus on getting our schools the best they can be.”

In addition, she said, “housing for young families is critical,” and that the board should explore the possibility of municipal water and look at what to do county-owned properties that aren’t being used.

In other actions, the board:

—Appointed Wilson as clerk to the board and senior executive Judi Green as deputy clerk;



—Changed the monthly meeting to the third Thursday of the month at 6 p.m. rather than the fourth Tuesday of each month so that the county attorney, who has a conflict on Tuesdays, can attend more meetings;

—Adopted the fiscal year 2025 budget calendar;

—Voted 2–3, with Walls, Jones and Phillips dissenting, to deny a request by the county administrator to give county employees two additional days off this year: the Friday after July 4 and the Monday before Christmas Eve;

—Voted 3–2, Jones and Walls dissenting, to reappoint Edith Turner to the Middle Peninsula – Northern Neck Community Services Board for the remaining two years of a three-year term, after a mistake in the paperwork had her prior term ending in the wrong year;

—Voted unanimously to follow the state holiday schedule;

—Delayed appointments to citizen boards and commissions until the Jan. 18 meeting, and

Unanimously made the following appointments:

Doss to the Mathews Broadband Advisory Board and the Middle Peninsula Planning District Commission, as well as to the Middle Peninsula Criminal Justice Services Board and the Middle Peninsula Regional Security Center Board beginning in July, after his retirement from the Middle Peninsula Regional Security Center, and as the Emergency Services Director;

Walls to the Middle Peninsula Criminal Justice Services Board, the Virginia Peninsulas Public Service Authority, the Waterways Ad Hoc Committee, and as the alternate Emergency Services Director;

Bowen to the Mathews Planning Commission, the Middle Peninsula Alliance, the Middle Peninsula Planning District Commission, the Parks and Recreation Commission, and as alternate to the Broadband Advisory Board;

Phillips to the Bay Consortium Workforce Investment Board; the Community Policy Management Team; the Middle Peninsula Regional Security Center Board until July, then as alternate after that; to the Middle Peninsula Criminal Justice Services Board until July; and as the Virginia Association of Counties legislative liaison;

School board member Mari Gibbs to the Chief Local Elected Official Consortium at the recommendation of former appointee John Priest and upon nomination by Doss.

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