

Task Force on the Economic Future of Western Maryland

December 2, 2021; 2 PM

Meeting Minutes

Task Force Members in Attendance:

- Senator George Edwards, *Co-Chair*
- Delegate Jason Buckel, *Co-Chair*
- Jake Shade, *Allegany County Commissioner, Tri-County Council of Western Maryland*
- Jack Schammel, *Asst. Director of Entrepreneur and Ecosystem Empowerment*
- Jeff Cline, *Washington County Commissioner*
- Juli McCoy, *Executive Director, Allegany County Chamber of Commerce*
- Jim Hinebaugh, *Garrett County Chamber of Commerce*
- Paul Frey, *President and CEO, Washington County Chamber of Commerce*
- Andrew Sargent, *Sr. Business Development Representative, Western MD, Maryland Department of Commerce*

I. Call to Order

a. Remarks by the Co-Chairs

Senator Edwards welcomed members of the public to the final meeting of the task force. Senator Edwards said he hoped for an orderly meeting and noted that public comment had been moved to before the vote on recommendations. Delegate Buckel welcomed new attendees to the task force and urged members of the public to read the interim report and recommendations to see what the task force has worked on over the past two years. Delegate Buckel noted that the recommendations are geared at stopping decline in Western Maryland to leave a strong region to residents' children and grandchildren. Senator Edwards noted that most people were attending the meeting for one issue and promised to clarify the task force's position on this.

b. Approval of minutes from November 12 meeting

The meeting minutes were approved without dissent.

II. Public Comment

Prior to a formal public comment section, Senator Edwards clarified that TFB-1 was drafted to say that if counties wished to take over or develop on land owned by the state that they would have to speak with DNR. Any resulting contracts would be approved by DNR. A member of the public said they were under the impression that the task force was looking to sell land. Multiple members of the task force indicated that this was not true. Juli McCoy said this comment illustrated what made things frustrating for the task force, as the intent of the recommendations is not accurately portrayed.

Delegate Buckel noted that the conversation with DNR would only occur “if” someone is interested in development. Delegate Buckel reiterated that the task force is just looking to create a better process with DNR and noted that any process with DNR would have the opportunity for public comment. A member of the public asked if there was currently a process in place. Delegate Buckel responded that there was a process in place but that it was very slow. Delegate Buckel noted that nearly 25 percent of the land in Allegany County is owned by the state which means a lot of economic opportunities are owned by the state as well. Delegate Buckel said this is a challenge that counties in other parts of the state do not face. A member of the public asked if the task force would put language in the document to guarantee no development would occur at Rocky Gap. Senator Edwards noted that all mentions of specific parcels of property were removed from the recommendations. A member of the public said it seemed that something was going to happen with Rocky Gap. Delegate Buckel said he understood the desire to put language in the document saying Rocky Gap will not be disturbed but that language would not be put into the wording.

Rick Bartlett spoke and thanked the task force for their work. Mr. Bartlett said there some positive recommendations. However, Mr. Bartlett said they were concerned by the recommendation to “create a process to communicate with counties regarding the prospect of development on state-owned land.” Mr. Bartlett asked why include this if the task force did not want to develop Rocky Gap. Delegate Buckel responded that the task force covers three counties in Maryland and is not solely focused on Allegany County or Rocky Gap. Mr. Bartlett asked if there was currently a process in place. Delegate Buckel said there was but that the process was slow. For example, Delegate Buckel noted that the current process requires legislation and the Maryland General Assembly only meets a few months out of the year. Mr. Bartlett asked why effort was not being put into Wills Mountain State Park instead. Juli McCoy mentioned that rock climbing opportunities had been inserted into TFB-1 after public comment in the preceding meeting to account for Wills Mountain State Park. Mr. Bartlett requested that the link to Wills Mountain State Park be made more explicit. Jake Shade reiterated that the language is broad so as to apply to all three counties. Senator Edwards noted that a letter from DNR on the issue indicated that DNR already has the authority described in TFB-1. Andrew Sargent said the language in question does not say much – just to get to know the process before being presented with another opportunity. Senator Edwards said they were trying to do this for all three counties and that Garrett County has more state owned land than Allegany County. Senator Edwards said he did not have an objection to removing the language as DNR already has the authority but he reiterated that the task force is trying to do things to stimulate economic development.

Kristina Hall stated that making money off state-owned land was a bit of a contradiction and that people did not want it. Ms. Hall asked the task force members if they thought building houses along Lake Habeeb would stimulate the economy. Senator Edwards noted that there were no plans to build houses along the lake, that much of the land bordering the lake was designated as wild lands and could not be developed, and that DNR already has the authority mentioned in TFB-1. Delegate Buckel asked if members of the public could imagine if the casino had not been built on state-owned land. Delegate

Buckel noted that the casino is built on land owned by the state and a private company operates those amenities. If 20 years ago no casino or lodge had been built, Delegate Buckel said, the economy of Allegany County would currently be in worse shape. Ms. Hall said the task force members did not have a map and that if they took another bite from the park at some point nothing would be left. Senator Edwards noted that the Western Maryland delegation has tried to get money from the state to clean the lakes and remove invasive species to improve the amenities offered.

William Neill said that if a vote was held to have no further economic development on state-owned lands he predicted it would win overwhelmingly. Mr. Neill said the debate in the task force sounded as if it were from the 1950s rather than the 2020s. Mr. Neill said that the issues facing Western Maryland are not unique and are faced by rural areas across the United States. Mr. Neill also said that Rocky Gap represents not just land but habitat for wildlife as well. Delegate Buckel said that he believed that if the region solely pitched itself as the parklands for wealthier residents of the I-95 corridor that he believed the region would continue to shrink. Mr. Neill responded that there are numerous growth models but that he believed the task force was only considering one. Delegate Buckel responded that the task force's other recommendations considered other ways to grow the economy.

Bob Jones said that if the task force puts something on the edge of Lake Habeeb that he believes it will push out people who value serenity from the park. Mr. Jones said that all should care for the park and planet for the future of residents' children and grandchildren.

Lisa Van Houtten asked for a clarification regarding Program Open Space. Senator Edwards provided an overview of the program. Ms. Van Houtten asked if the funding could be used to redevelop land rather than purchase new land. Senator Edwards and Jake Shade agreed. Ms. Van Houtten also mentioned she was in favor of investment opportunities and that brownfield sites provided a good way to revitalize the region. Ms. Van Houtten asked that this be considered rather than redeveloping Rocky Gap. Senator Edwards said that brownfield sites were being looked at.

Dennis Tipton stated that some of the confusion around the task force's recommendations may come from the fact that some members' public statements of goals for economic development differ from each other.

Steve Nelson said he was relieved to see that the recommendations from the interim report were being rescinded and that he was in favor of TFB-1 and approved of the language regarding P3s.

Champ Zumbrun said he agreed with Mr. Nelson. Mr. Zumbrun said the impacts associated with the environment are substantial. Mr. Zumbrun cited a study that said Rocky Gap State Park had the second largest impact for ice fishing destinations in the nation. Mr. Zumbrun also noted less quantifiable benefits of parklands such as offering residents the ability to recreate safely during a pandemic. Mr. Zumbrun mentioned brownfield sites as locations for economic growth. Delegate Buckel said that Garrett County has more parkland than Allegany County and yet the economy of the region has not grown. Delegate Buckel said he was concerned that relying solely on natural beauty

would not lead to growth. Senator Edwards noted how strongly he wanted businesses to move to the area.

Ann Townsell stated that members of the public in attendance were in favor of economic development; the members of the public just do not want park lands taken for that development. Ms. Townsell commented on the legacy of Edward Habeeb and requested that development be done in other areas first, such as Canal Place.

Ellen McDaniel Weissler said there was not a person in the room who did not want Allegany County economically developed or to expand the population base. Ms. McDaniel Weissler commented on the many amenities in the area including museums, galleries, and trails but said that a lack of support kept those amenities from reaching their full potential.

Greg Thomas said that residents in attendance were not protesting change but rather bad ideas. Mr. Thomas said he did not believe that giving away resources would allow the county to grow. Mr. Thomas stressed that any proposals for development on parkland should be studied to ensure they would work.

III. Vote on Recommendations for Final Report

Task force members voted on the recommendations. A tally of how each member voted is recorded in the table on the next page. Recommendations were voted on one at a time. For TFB-1, Senator Edwards made a motion and Delegate Buckel seconded to remove the final bullet from the language (on creating a process to communicate with counties regarding the prospect of development on state-owned land). This motion was approved as recorded in the table as well. Al Delia was not present at the meeting but emailed Michael Siers with his votes on the recommendations as written prior to the meeting.

Record of Votes During December 2 Meeting

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IV. Closing Remarks/Adjournment

Senator Edwards thanked members of the task force and members of the public for coming out and for all of the hard work. Senator Edwards said he believed the recommendations were good and urged members of the public to support the recommendations during the upcoming legislative session. Delegate Buckel echoed these remarks.