

**WASHINGTON COUNTY PLANNING COMMISSION
REGULAR MEETING
January 5, 2026**

The Washington County Planning Commission held its regular monthly meeting on Monday, January 5, 2026 at 6:00 p.m. at the Washington County Administrative Complex, 100 W. Washington Street, Room 2000, Hagerstown, MD.

CALL TO ORDER AND ROLL CALL

The Vice-Chairman called the meeting to order at 6:00 p.m.

Planning Commission members present were: Jeff Semler, Vice-Chairman; Jay Miller, BJ Goetz, Terrie Shank, Laura Lane-Unsworth, Doug Wright, Jr. and Ex-officio County Commissioner Randy Wagner. Staff members present were: Washington County Department of Planning & Zoning: Jennifer Kinzer, Interim Director; Travis Allen, Senior Planner; and Debra Eckard, Office Manager.

NEW BUSINESS

MINUTES

Motion and Vote: Mr. Miller made a motion to approve the minutes of the December 1, 2025 Planning Commission meeting as presented. The motion was seconded by Ms. Shank and unanimously approved with Mr. Wright and Ms. Lane-Unsworth abstaining from the vote.

OTHER BUSINESS

Bowman North LLC [S-23-065]

Ms. Kinzer presented a one-year extension request for a final plat to subdivide four lots from an existing 22.47-acre parcel located at 17425 Snyder's Landing Road in Sharpsburg. The project was accepted and routed for review on February 6, 2024 and has been under review since that time. If the extension is approved, the new expiration date would be February 5, 2027.

Motion and Vote: Mr. Miller made a motion to approve the one-year extension request as presented. The motion was seconded by Ms. Shank and unanimously approved.

Introduction of Proposed Text Amendments to the Forest Conservation Ordinance

Mr. Allen explained that amendments to the Forest Conservation Ordinance will be forthcoming in the next few months. These amendments are mandated due to the passage of State Bill 526 in February 2023. Subsequent amendments under HB 1511 require that most changes under the Bill be adopted by July 1, 2026. These changes are a result of a statewide technical study released in 2022 (mandated by HB 991) indicating changes in forest cover and tree canopy in the State of Maryland. This study was the most comprehensive look of changes to forest cover in Maryland since the passage of the Forest Conservation Act of 1991. Among other goals, the purpose of the study was to evaluate the effectiveness of forest protection laws over the past 20 years and to track progress towards the State's effort in completing its portion of the Chesapeake Bay agreement. The study revealed that State laws, such as the Forest Conservation Act, have been effective in stabilizing forest loss throughout the State, particularly in the last 10 years despite the growing population statewide. The positive nature of this overall trend is mitigated somewhat by a concurrent trend in replacement of forest cover with "tree canopy outside of forest" (forest fragmentation). Fragmented forests do not offer the same benefits to people and wildlife as continuous blocks of intact forest cover. Therefore, the State believes this is the time to further strengthen forest protection to meet the increasingly complex future challenges as they relate to land use.

Mr. Allen presented some of the highlights of a few of the major changes that are part of the statewide legislation.

- 1) Changes to mitigation ratios. Currently, for most projects, mitigation of $\frac{1}{4}$ of an acre to 1 acre of disturbed area is required depending on what is proposed for the property. This will be changed to a 1 to 1 ratio unless the project is taking place in a Priority Funding Area (PFA), in which case mitigation would be $\frac{1}{2}$ acre to 1 acre of disturbed area.
- 2) New exemptions for certain types of land use will be instituted. This will include transit-oriented development, multi-family housing and solar facilities. These types of projects will not be excluded entirely from forest mitigation requirements, but they will not be responsible for afforestation.

- 3) Expanded priority areas. These will include, among other resources, forest in urban areas and high value watersheds.
- 4) Expanded review and challenge to any development plan. There will be specific standards and criteria related to this change. Forest clearing that takes place in an expanded priority area may require public notice and comment as part of the approval process.

Mr. Allen stated the changes required by the State are meant to reinforce Smart Growth principles. The State wants development to occur in the PFAs and to safeguard rural lands from development. In addition to the State-mandated changes, staff are proposing changes to modernize the Ordinance, which has never been comprehensively amended since its adoption in 1993. Mr. Allen noted there are many references in the current Ordinance that are obsolete and time has clarified how the Ordinance is administered. These changes are needed to bring the Ordinance into compliance with current State law including all changes since its adoption, not just those mandated by the current legislation.

Discussion and Comments: Commissioner Wagner asked how many projects that were recently reviewed would have been affected by these new regulations. Mr. Allen explained that it would have affected many of the projects where development is taking place on rural lands. The County has extensive PFAs around the towns that would be less affected.

Mr. Miller asked if there are no trees on a specific development site, would the developer be required to plant trees on the site. Mr. Allen stated that there is an afforestation requirement even if there are no trees on the site; this is not a new requirement.

Ms. Shank asked how these changes affect the recently adopted Comprehensive Plan. Mr. Allen stated that a lot of broader policies are already included in the Plan. Staff will propose changes to the FCO that reinforces some of the ideas and policies within the Comprehensive Plan.

There were discussions regarding the use of PIL money to provide incentives, planting of larger caliper trees to help meet survivability requirements, enforcement of the Ordinance across the State and County, etc.

Update of Projects Initialized

Ms. Kinzer provided a written report for land development plan review projects initialized during the month of November including three site plans.

Ms. Kinzer stated that the PUD (Planned Unit Development) overlay was removed from Black Rock on December 26, 2025. The cluster plan approval letter will be signed tomorrow so the developer can move forward with the preliminary plat for the proposed cluster development.

Motion and Vote: Mr. Miller made a motion to adjourn to Closed Session. The motion was seconded by Ms. Shank and unanimously approved.

CLOSED SESSION

To discuss the appointment, re-appointment, employment, assignment, promotion, discipline, demotion, compensation, removal, resignation, or performance evaluation of appointees, employees, or officials over whom this public body has jurisdiction; or any other personnel matter that affects one or more specific individuals.

Motion and Vote: Mr. Miller made a motion to adjourn Closed Session and to resume Open Session. The motion was seconded by Mr. Goetz and unanimously approved.

ELECTION OF OFFICERS

Motion and Vote: Ms. Shank made a motion to nominate Mr. Semler as Chairman. The motion was seconded by Mr. Miller and unanimously approved.

Motion and Vote: Mr. Goetz made a motion to nominate Mr. Miller as Vice-Chairman. The motion was seconded by Ms. Shank and unanimously approved.

ADJOURNMENT

Mr. Miller made a motion to adjourn the meeting at 6:40 p.m. The motion was seconded by Mr. Goetz and so ordered by the Chairman.

UPCOMING MEETINGS

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1. February 2, 2026, 6:00 p.m. – Washington County Planning Commission regular meeting

Respectfully submitted,



Jeff Semler, Vice-Chairman