

Dukes County Commission (DCC)
Meeting Minutes
Wednesday, Feb 4, 2026
4:00 PM
Remote Meeting

Dukes County Commissioners: Doug Ruskin, Randy Milch, Don Leopold (left the meeting 4:45), Tristan Israel, Christine Todd, Peter Wharton (left meeting 4:12), Juli Vanderhoop (Joined 4:32)

County staff: Juliet Mulinare, Martina Thornton, Paulo DeOliveira (joined 4:20)

Other: Ebba Hierta, Cameron Naron (left 4:32), Ethan Genter, Eunki Seonwoo, Joseph Perry (left the meeting 4:10), Robert Johnston (left 4:30), Michael Klein (left 4:30)

Christine called the meeting to order at 4:00pm.

Minutes from 1-21-2026

Doug/Randy moved to approve the minutes from January 21, 2026. Doug- yes, Don – yes, Randy- yes, Tristan- yes, Christine -yes. Motion carries.

County governance / Possible Charter Study discussion

Christine stated a charter study was done back in 2007, ended in 2008 and was published in 2009 with the edict that it should be done every 8 years, which means it should have been done in 2016. It is time that we have another charter study done. The purpose being to evaluate, update, or change the structure of local government. To identify core community values, address inefficiencies, adapt to changing demographics and service needs. Modernize outdated structures, improve efficiency and accountability, respond to crises, have local control and home rule, provide public input, and, have a mandated periodic review.

This is strictly, an exercise of exploration at this point to find out what alternatives might be out there that could prove to be more effective in local governance.

Peter questioned how long this would take, the last study took 1 ½ years.

Tristan brought up creating a group to explore how to move to the next step. Randy agreed to exploring the options.

Doug thinks exploring before creating a Charter Commission would entail a real loss of time. Research will take quite a bit of time and waiting for that to be complete and then creating a Charter Commission, if needed, could add a year or more. He mentioned all the commissioners appreciate the degree to which they feel constrained by the existing charter. The way it works now, the county comes up with ideas, policies, things it wants to do to benefit all the towns, and then has to go through a lot of time and effort to sell whatever it is at the town level. The reverse, where the towns agree up front to work together on an initiative and then charge the county - or whatever might replace it - with actually doing the work that they want changes the dynamic dramatically. Doug thinks if the group can come to a place where the Islands can operate in a much more cohesive and consensus-driven way, everybody will benefit.

Tristan told the group there were two votes taken prior to the last Charter Study Commission concerning whether the island town supported and, in those votes, overwhelmingly, the community supported the

study. Most rejected the idea of, making any kind of substantive, legislative change. It is legislative change that's required. Doug thinks it would be more productive to have a discussions to see if it's possible to gather support in the community for a more regional approach to things. To engage people from the towns, and to engage our legislators as well, and have that discussion first before moving to a more drastic approach.

Don questioned that we'd have to look at first what would be the charter of such a group. Simply doing it because it hasn't been done for a while isn't a charter. Given county government, how could it work most effectively? Or do we look at more broadly, this is an opportunity, in the light of all of the changes, to look at the island, to look at the community and think through what the governance issues are and how to maximize. Don feels it is really important for the aperture not to be inside out, not to be the county, the aperture should be the islands and look at this much more holistically

Doug would like to look at this regional council of government structure. He would like the exploratory process to formally include that as an option. And within that, the possibility of a visit to one or more successful counties. Because he doesn't think we can report back without some level of experience

Randy moved Tristan seconded to make a motion that we form a committee, with Doug to be the chair, to support gathering information from relevant and interested parties to alternative structures of county governance with a strict time limit attached.

Doug- yes, Don – yes, Randy- yes, Tristan- yes, Christine -yes. Motion carries.

Doug would like to know what options are available to the committee. He would like the use of council when needed to clarify certain issues as they come up. It was decided use of council will be reviewed on a case by case bases, within budget restrictions.

Doug requested identifying the members of this committee. Christine and Doug will review by the end of the week.

Volunteer Conduct Policy

Christine recommended determining whether or not there is a policy in our administrative code that addresses volunteers conduct; Essential standards of behavior, ensuring a safe, respectful, productive environment for any of the people that serve the county, whether it's appointed or elected positions. The chair wants to make sure we have something properly in place.

Doug thought there wasn't much to discuss unless there's draft in front of the group.

Doug made a motion that we draft such a policy of Volunteer Conduct. There was no second and no vote.

Christine stated we'll figure something out and present it to the County Commission for approval at a future date. No discussion on who will be drafting the policy.

Committee Updates

- Finance Committee – Will be meeting next week. The FY25 audit is being wrapped up. Should be completed by the end of March, Juliet has requested a draft before that.
- Land Use Committee- Will review in executive session later in the meeting.

- Nominating Committee – Will meet at the end of week to decide on Steamship Board candidates to bring to the Commission for interviews.
- Communication Committee- The museum will be holding 2 events for the 250th anniversary of the country. June and October, dates to be determined.

Tristan mentioned that the commissioners volunteered to hold the County Commissioners Association meeting in September. Date, time, & location to be determined.

Manager's Report

Budget Season Updates: West Tisbury and Chilmark FinCom presentations went well. Edgartown FinCom presentation is on Tuesday, February 8th at 4pm via Zoom.

Legislative Updates:

Update on the legislation regarding increased access to hunting: Public hearings have been scheduled, and feedback can be submitted here: [Hunting laws public feedback | Mass.gov](#)

Martina will be submitting the prepared county letter in support, along with the letter in support crafted by the local boards of health agents.

To Expand Crossbow hunting - Senate Bill S595 - <https://malegislature.gov/Bills/194/S595>

To Reduce Setbacks - Senate Bill S498 - <https://malegislature.gov/Bills/193/SD65>

The County Commissioners Association meeting in Plymouth, January 30th: Christine, Tristan, Doug, Juli, and Martina attended. Consensus was for the administrators of the counties to get together to look into the Courthouse lease that is one-sided, favoring the State, and what we can collectively do to lobby for change. The other counties were also interested in looking into the interpretation of the MGL Ch. 35, Sec. 30, on how the county tax is calculated, as all are financially strangled by rising costs and insufficient revenues. They also emphasized the need for closer collaboration with our federal delegation and using NACO – National Association of Counties and their team to lobby to make sure that new spending bills include counties under 50,000 population as recipients, so that we can see more of similar funding streams like ARPA. They were saying that in general, the counties did a great job administering ARPA, spending about 1% on administration, which makes us much more efficient than the State in distributing federal dollars where they are needed in the local communities.

Martina is exploring a new grant funding opportunity with the MV Hospital, Island Health Care, Boards of Health, and MV Community Services that is coming in the next couple of months out of the federal government, specifically for rural communities to improve access to health care.

Emergency Management – MV Emergency Management Coordination Key Stakeholders Conversation will be conducted next week. If interested, you can schedule a conversation with Mike Weston. Your input, specific to your unique role(s) as commissioners, former or current select board members, and your other activities in the areas of planning and preparedness and community engagement, along with your experiences as long-time islanders in leadership roles, is valuable to the development of a comprehensive island-wide emergency management, response, and recovery strategy. You can schedule time at your convenience using this link: [Martha's Vineyard Emergency Management Coordination Key Stakeholder Conversation.](#)

New Business-

Tristan, as a member of joint transportation committee, asked that the next DOT meeting be held on Zoom so Islanders could be a part of the conversation and stay informed. The topic of the bridge construction expected to be a 10-year project. It was brought up that there is a lot of detailed information on there website.

Doug suggest that we write a letter that includes our state reps, because this is no small thing, and the fact that we are physically disconnected from the Cape shouldn't change, how well we are informed. He went on

to say that it's such an important issue that even if they don't do it by Zoom, we probably should get somebody up there when they meet at least for one meeting, to get a sense of what's going on.

Public Comment-

Ebba Hierta- She is concerned that the first round of candidate selection of the Steamship position was held in secrecy, she found it to be appalling. She feels this should be a public process, beginning to end. She is also concerned about the new reservation system and she hopes whoever is appointed to the position will keep in mind the needs of Islanders.

Christine let her know there was never any intention of secrecy. We were basically trying to essentially provide the privacy that was requested by certain individuals who were seeking to be appointed to the steamship position. And we have maintained that agreement with them until, you know, this coming Friday, when the finalists are going to be presented to the public.

Calendar - The next county commissioner's meeting is scheduled for Wednesday, February 18th at 4pm.

Christine/Doug moved to go to executive session at 4:58. Doug- yes, Don – yes, Randy- yes, Peter- yes, Tristan- yes, Christine -yes. Motion carries.

Executive Session in accordance with MGL Chapter 30A, Section 21 (a) 2, – To consider the purchase, exchange, lease or value of real property if the chair declares that an open meeting may have a detrimental effect on the negotiating position of the public body and not to reconvene in open session.

Certified by:

T. George Davis, Clerk of Courts

