

Commission on the Environment

2025 Annual Report

This Annual Report from the Commission on the Environment (henceforth referred to as “COE” or “the Commission”) covers the period of January - December 2025 and provides a summary of significant tasks that the COE has undertaken during that timeframe.

Outline

1. Membership
2. Meeting Information
3. Purpose and Mission Statement
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Membership

January - June 2024

- Chair - Molly Boron
- Vice Chair - Nicole Bega
- Secretary - Kristen Whitesell
- Outreach/Social Media Chair - Melissa Rodriguez
- Member - Robert Hurry
- Member - Jennifer Raley
- Member - Leslie Taylor

July - December 2024

- Chair - Nicole Bega Hance
- Vice Chair - Leslie Taylor
- Secretary - Kristen Whitesell
- Member - Molly Boron
- Member - Robert Hurry
- Member - Jennifer Raley
- Member - Patrick Schoenberger (10/25)

Ex Officio Member - Heather Moritz, Environmental Health Director with St. Mary's County Health Department

Staff Support - AJ Cheney, Environmental Planner with Department of Land Use and Growth Management

Meeting Information

COE meets at 6:30 pm on the first Tuesday of every month in Room 14 of the Potomac Building. COE abides by the Open Meetings Act and public participation is available through Zoom, dial-in and in-person attendance.

Purpose and Mission Statement

The Purpose of the Commission on the Environment is to gather environmental concerns from local residents and research related topics, utilizing available public and private resources, and advance appropriate concerns and suggestions to the Commissioners of St. Mary's County.

The COE also acts at the Solid Waste Advisory Committee in accordance with the St. Mary's County Comprehensive Waste Management and Recycling Plan.

Highlights of COE Work

- St. Mary's County Earth Day Celebration
- Sustainability Awards
- Proclamations
 - Earth Day
 - World Sustainability Day
- Tree Canopy Task Force
- Bird-Safe Architecture
 - Window Film Installation
 - St. Mary's College of Maryland
- Outreach and Education
- Collaboration and Coalition-Building
 - Meeting of the Minds



From left to right: Nicole Hance, Leslie Taylor, George (Mike) Thompson, Robert Hurry, Melissa Rodriguez, Jennifer Raley, and Molly Boron pictured at Earth Day 2025

Areas of Focus

St. Mary's County Earth Day Celebration

On Saturday, April 26, 2025, the Commission hosted its third annual Earth Day Celebration at Summerseat Farm. Despite rainy weather, 220 attendees enjoyed live music, farm animal interactions, and activities and offerings from 27 vendors and exhibitors.



Members pictured dividing up native plants for the event's giveaway

The Commission distributed 180 native flowering plants (in addition to several native trees), discussed environmental priorities with attendees, and hosted a display on eco-friendly cleaning products and bird safe window film.

As an additional activity this year, three community volunteers each hosted a guided nature hike on Summerseat's trails. While the participation on these walks was low (potentially due to the weather), the Commission aims to add similar activities to next year's festivities.

Sustainability Awards

The Commission chose to forgo a 2024 Sustainability Awards season, with renewed efforts for a 2025 Awards season.

Proclamations

In an effort to raise awareness of the importance of environmental sustainability, the Commission pursued proclamations from the St. Mary's County Commissioners:

1. On April 22, 2025, COE oversaw the proclamation for Earth Day (same date), using the opportunity to advertise for the upcoming Earth Day Celebration.



Commission on the Environment members pictured with the County Commissioners for the April 22, 2025 Earth Day Proclamation

2. On October 28, 2025, COE oversaw the proclamation for World Sustainability Day (October 29, 2025), and used the opportunity to encourage County residents to submit nominations for our 2025 Annual Sustainability Awards.

Tree Canopy Task Force

As a continuation of the Commission's work in years past, in January 2025, COE submitted a Memorandum to the County Commissioners to designate a Tree Canopy Task Force, which would be able to redirect fee-in-lieu funds from development from an inactive account to grant-seeking entities in the county looking to plant trees.

The Memorandum has since moved up the chain of command to the State of Maryland's Critical Area Commission. No further action has been taken on this initiative.

Bird-Safe Architecture

The Commission continues to advocate for bird-safe architecture to reduce the staggering number of annual bird fatalities through collisions with the built environment.

End-of-FY25 funds were reallocated to purchasing additional bird-safe window film. The Commission installed this film on select windows at the Leonardtown Library and the Patuxent Building (home of the Department of Land Use and Growth Management).

COE has been working with the Sustainability Fellow at St. Mary's College of Maryland (SMCM) to advocate for bird-safe architecture on their campus as well as SOMD Audubon to raise awareness of the issue for future state legislation.

Outreach & Education

The Commission attended RiverFest held at St. Mary's City on September 27. Unfortunately, the event was poorly attended due to an impending storm that caused the event to be cancelled early.

Collaboration & Coalition-Building

The Commission hosted its inaugural Meeting of the Minds to bring together local environmental groups in an effort to establish the preeminent environmental priorities of Southern Maryland, identify potential areas of focus for collective action, and strengthen the networks between these diverse groups.

On November 18, 2025 at the Leonardtown Library, over 30 individuals from about two dozen environmental organizations convened to discuss environmental concerns in St. Mary's County. Feedback shared both during the meeting and through an exit survey indicated there is a strong need for coordination, collaboration, and collective action within our county.

Discussions identified three key environmental priorities in common among the groups:



Demo installation of bird safe window film at the Leonardtown Library

1. Youth Environmental Education/Literacy
2. Coalition-Building & Buy-In
3. Native Plants

After these priorities were identified, participants split into three groups and discussed the finer details of each priority:

Key Takeaways from Youth Environmental Education/Literacy Group

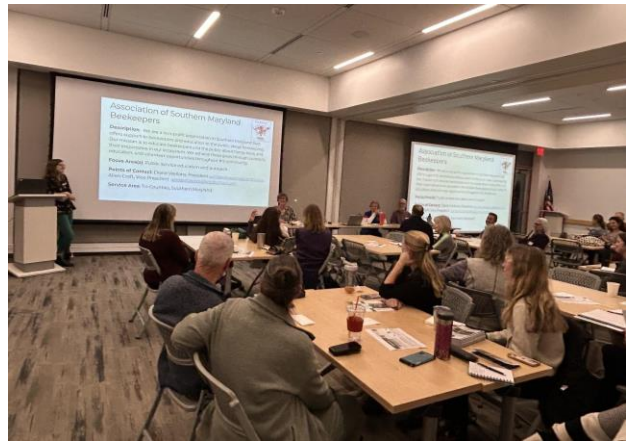
- The main priority expressed was the reestablishment of a permanent environmental education center in St. Mary's County, whether by reinstating or replacing The Elms.
- COMAR 13A.04.17.01 mandates environmental teaching in Maryland schools.
 - [Maryland's Environmental Literacy Standards and Framework](#)
 - Expressed need to see/collect data on current environmental literacy initiatives/instruction in schools to ensure compliance
- After school programs can connect students with nature, but require consistent, vetted adult volunteers

Key Takeaways from Coalition-Building & Buy-In Group

- Create space - introduce your networks to other environmental organizations
 - Often, nascent relationships with schools involve a lot of red tape. If you have an existing partnership with harder to reach organizations, extend your support to those just getting started.
- Educate the public about the importance of environmental literacy
 - Increase funding for environmental literacy in schools
 - Expand environmental outreach and education
- Meet people where they are - broaden your audience by connecting environmental issues with other issues in the community
 - Ex. Tree planting in over-developed areas can reduce heat stress, improve air quality, and boost mental health. *Let's just make sure to plant native trees.*
- How to maintain long-term relationships in sectors with high turnover

Key Takeaways from Native Plants Group

- Encourage gardening with native plants
 - Support public demonstration gardens
 - Work with landowners to transition traditional turf lawns to meadow and grasslands
 - Raise awareness of public grants to replace bulkheads and riprap with living shorelines
 - Educate on benefits of native plants, both from a wildlife standpoint and a maintenance once
- Native tree canopy replacement, county replanting requirements
- Removal of invasive species
- Discourage use of herbicides and pesticides



Introductions of each environmental group at the Meeting of the Minds

After the success of the first Meeting of the Minds, the COE plans to continue these meetings in 2026.

Conclusion

The Commission on the Environment is pleased to submit this review of 2025 and looks forward to continuing its work in 2026.

Respectfully submitted,
Nicole Hance, COE Chair