CITY OF FAIRFAX ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY
MEETING MINUTES
March 4, 2026, 6:00pm

In Person at 10306 Eaton Place, Training Room 115AB

Commissioners Present:
Chair Jeff Hermann
Vice Chair Patrick Soleymani
Treasurer Dawn McGruder
Secretary Michelle Cho
Commissioner Kathleen Paley
Commissioner Kristin Feenstra
Commissioner Michelle Nguyen

Others Present:
Brooke Hardin, Interim Director, Economic Development Department
Matthew Easley, Interim CEO, Assistant Director of Operations and Finance, Economic Development Department
Brittany Jones, PR and Marketing Manager, Economic Development Department
Stephanie Gerson, Tourism Specialist, Economic Development Department
Meryam El Gazzah, Economic Development Associate, Economic Development Department
Cheyenne Galloway, Marketing Associate, Economic Development Department

1. Call to Order — Chair Hermann
    a. Chair Hermann called the meeting to order at 6:00 PM
2. Adoption of the March Meeting Agenda **[VOTE]** Commissioners
    a. Secretary Cho Motions
    b. Motion Passes Unanimously
3. Adoption of the February Meeting Minutes **[VOTE]** Commissioners
    a. Secretary Cho Motions
    b. Motion Passes Unanimously
4. Old Town Fairfax Business Association (OTFBA) Update
   OTFBA Executive Director, Tina Disch
    a. Executive Overview
        i. Director Disch provided an overview of her professional background and first year with the organization, emphasizing experience in community-based economic development, tourism, and small business support.
        ii. Director Disch thanked the City of Fairfax and the Economic Development Authority for continued grant funding, and reaffirmed OTFBA's commitment to responsible stewardship of public funds.
    b. Foundational work and organizational stabilization:

i. FY2025 was described as a foundational year focused on organizational stabilization, including membership verification, database implementation, and website restructuring.
ii. Board-led strategic visioning sessions conducted with Perch Advisors clarified OTFBA's mission, value proposition, and priorities, with a renewed emphasis on membership, destination development, and business support.

c. Membership and event performance:
    i. Membership grew to approximately 65–68 active members by early 2026, with a long-term goal of exceeding 100 members.
    ii. The Asian Festival attracted an estimated 15,000–20,000 attendees and drew visitors from across the DMV region, strengthening Old Town Fairfax's profile as a destination.
    iii. OTFBA partnered with the City, Economic Development, and the Chamber of Commerce on multiple community events.
d. Financial performance and revenue diversification:
    i. In addition to City grant funding, OTFBA generated approximately $46,000 from festival sponsorships, $4,000 from membership dues, $21,000 from vendor income, and $4,200 from merchandise sales.
    ii. Membership dues were increased from $95 to $150 to better reflect organizational value.
    iii. Grant funds supported executive leadership retention, strategic planning, branding, and marketing, with unused payroll funds reallocated to marketing initiatives.
e. Branding, marketing, and digital presence:
    i. OTFBA completed a comprehensive brand refresh, including updated visual identity, lamppost banners, tents, and branded collateral.
    ii. The website was fully redesigned to be public-facing and destination-oriented, featuring directories, maps, event calendars, and blogs.
    iii. Marketing and social media activation resulted in approximately 129,000 website visits, 970,000 Instagram views, and 2.5 million Facebook views in 2025, with follower growth from 273 to over 1,500.
    iv. Online metrics are approximate, based on platform reported data (Squarespace and social platforms), as Google Analytics implementation is ongoing.
f. Sponsored programs and economic impact:
    i. Sponsored programs housed at Mason Enterprise Center (MEC) — including Mason SBDC, Virginia APEX Accelerator, and the Women's Business Center of Northern Virginia, continue to deliver the majority of the Center's economic impact.
    ii. These programs provide critical services including early-stage business support, government contracting assistance, international business development, and capital access.
    iii. Lease agreements for sponsored programs covering 18 offices are scheduled for renewal at the end of the fiscal year.
g. Strategic planning: Pathway to Action findings:

i. Community and stakeholder polling identified key challenges: parking and traffic congestion, walkability gaps, limited business variety, event-driven visitation patterns, and insufficient marketing visibility.
ii. Five priority focus areas were identified:
1. Expansion of community events to drive consistent foot traffic.
2. Differentiated communication strategies for members and the public
3. Business attraction and activation, including market-based incubation
4. Wayfinding and placemaking improvements
5. Business advocacy and early engagement in City planning processes

h. Wayfinding, placemaking, and maps
i. OTFBA collaborated with City partners to evaluate and recommend improvements to vehicular wayfinding signage, particularly related to parking visibility.
ii. New district maps were produced and distributed through businesses, George Mason University residence halls, and student services locations.
iii. Plans are underway to make maps financially sustainable through advertising.

i. Programs, committees, and partnerships
i. OTFBA established standing committees focused on events, finance, membership/marketing, and placemaking to increase member engagement and shared leadership.
ii. Monthly coffee meetups were launched to strengthen business collaboration, with consideration for quarterly extended or evening formats.
iii. Town-and-gown partnerships with George Mason University expanded through student engagement initiatives, including a pilot coffee crawl for new transfer students.

j. Organizational sustainability and next steps
i. The finance committee identified the need to build operating reserves over the next 3–5 years to ensure long-term sustainability beyond reimbursement-based grants.
ii. The Executive Director reported improved organizational capacity, stronger stakeholder engagement, and increased business confidence compared to the prior year.
iii. OTFBA will continue advancing strategic priorities and return with future updates on implementation progress.

5. Finance and Operations Update
Interim CEO and Assistant Director, Matthew Easley
a. Banking Services Transition:
i. Interim CEO and Assistant Director Easley reported that the division completed a review and solicitation process for new banking services.
ii. After evaluating proposals, the Economic Development Authority selected TD Bank to provide banking services.

iii. The bank was selected for offering the most comprehensive suite of services while maintaining responsive, relationship-based support.
iv. The Authority will transition its accounts from Truist Financial, which had presented operational challenges.
v. Staff will implement a phased and strategic transition to ensure continuity of financial operations and minimize disruption.
vi. The solicitation process began in January and has now concluded, with implementation work beginning.

b. MEC Fairfax governance and partnership review:
ii. Interim CEO and Assistant Director Easley provided an update on ongoing discussions with leadership at George Mason University regarding the governance structure of MEC Fairfax.
iii. Due to the Authority's status under a government-level audit for the past three years, staff are reviewing all agreements to ensure full compliance with applicable requirements
iv. The governing document for MEC Fairfax is the Memorandum of Agreement (MOA), which staff are currently reviewing alongside university partners.
v. The process was described as a "soft reset" intended to strengthen and clarify the long-standing partnership between the Authority and the university.
vi. Discussions are ongoing, and further engagement with university leadership is expected, including the Office of the Provost.

c. Façade and Interior Improvement Grant (FIIG) – Iteration 3:
i. Interim CEO and Assistant Director Easley provided an update on the third iteration of the Facade and Interior Improvement Grant (FIIG) program.
ii. The program provides reimbursable grants covering up to 50% of project costs, with awards capped at $20,000 per applicant.
iii. The review committee included Secretary Cho of the Economic Development Authority, Kirsten Lockhart of the Planning Commission, and James Schroeder of the Board of Architectural Review.
iv. The committee reviewed approximately six to seven applications, with four projects approved for funding.
v. Grant awards include:
    i. COZE The Space - $20,000
    ii. Declieu Coffee & Sandwich - $20,000
    iii. Hand&Stone Massage and Facial Spa - $16,750
    iv. Bonds Escape Room - $12,425
    v. The Authority awarded approximately $69,000 in grants, leveraging approximately $346,000 in private project investment, for a total investment of roughly $450,000 within the City.
    vi. Staff emphasized that this public-private leverage is a key performance metric for the program.

d. Program evaluation and communication

i. Staff will conduct a post-program evaluation to identify improvements and determine whether there is interest in continuing the program in future fiscal years.
ii. Commissioners requested a cumulative summary of results from all three FIG program iterations, including total leveraged investment.
iii. Before-and-after project photos will be collected once projects reach approximately 75% completion and reimbursement requests are submitted.
iv. A potential check-presentation event is being explored to highlight project outcomes and public investment.

e. Accounting Services transition
i. Interim CEO and Assistant Director Easley announced the transition of accounting services to Versatile Solutions, following a recommendation from the Treasurer.
ii. During the interim period, financial operations were supported by The McGruder Group to ensure continuity and transparency.
iii. An engagement agreement has now been executed, and staff anticipate completing the operational transition within the next one to two weeks.
iv. The new arrangement is expected to provide a more efficient and streamlined financial management process.

6. PR and Marketing Update
PR & Marketing Manager Brittany Jones
a. EagleBank Arena advertising partnership
i. PR & Marketing Manager Jones introduced the Marketing Associate Cheyenne Galloway to present performance results from the digital advertising placed at EagleBank Arena.
ii. The campaign is part of a one-year, $15,000 partnership and has been running for approximately six weeks.
iii. Ads were placed in coordination with George Mason University Athletics through Playfly.

b. Homecoming City Crawl campaign (Jan.30 – Feb.6)
i. Static ads ran during select GMU men's and women's basketball games.
ii. Although no QR code tracking was used, staff analyzed registration data for the Homecoming City Crawl event.
iii. Signups increased from 138 prior to the February 4 game to 256 immediately after, with 297 total signups by the end of the campaign.
iv. Staff concluded the ads contributed to increased event participation.

c. "After the Game" tourism ads (Feb.6 – Feb.15):
i. Video ads promoted post-game activities in Fairfax City and ran during the Game Day Festival, tailgate, and select men's basketball games.
ii. Without QR tracking, performance was evaluated using Google Analytics.
iii. The tourism landing page recorded 24-page views from 9 active users, with an average engagement time of 32 seconds.
iv. Linked events pages recorded 45-page views from 25 active users, indicating secondary engagement.

d. Valentine's Day Campaign and QR code tracking (Feb.13- Feb.15):

i. QR code tracking was introduced during the Valentine's Day campaign.
ii. Due to a scheduling miscommunication, ads ran at limited locations rather than arena-wide.
iii. Despite reduced exposure, the campaign generated 8 unique QR scans, 7 active users, and an average engagement time of 25 seconds.
iv. Staff repurposed previously approved "After the Game" ads to ensure continuity.

e. Winter Fairfax City Restaurant Week campaign (Feb. 20 – Mar. 8):
i. Ads ran during multiple GMU athletic events, a comedy tour, and the Harlem Globetrotters event.
ii. As of February 20, the campaign recorded 4 QR scans and 878 direct site sessions.
iii. The Restaurant Week website recorded 11,842 unique visitors, with 82% new visitors and 18% returning visitors.
iv. Marketing Associate Galloway noted the return visitor rate as a positive indicator of sustained interest.

f. Lessons learned and future improvements
i. Staff identified several operational improvements, including simplifying QR code design, adjusting placement for visibility, and limiting QR use where scanning is impractical.
ii. Moving forward, campaigns will incorporate UTM links to improve attribution and campaign performance tracking.
iii. They also reported working with website developers to resolve Google Analytics configuration issues to ensure more accurate data reporting.

g. Washington Business Journal partnership
i. PR & Marketing Manager Jones reported on outcomes from a paid media partnership with the Washington Business Journal.
ii. The first article, focused on the Mason Enterprise Center, received 243 native article views and a 0.44% click-through rate, which the publisher characterized as strong performance.
iii. Reader engagement averaged approximately 90 seconds, indicating substantive content interaction.
iv. The article was also featured in the publication's Morning Edition newsletter, which achieved an approximately 50% open rate.

h. Upcoming op-ed and thought leadership strategy
i. A second article, structured as an op-ed titled *"Retail Is Not a Fallback Plan—It's a Competitive Advantage,"* has been submitted and is expected to publish in mid-March.
ii. The op-ed highlights retail as a strategic economic development tool in built-out cities and positions Fairfax City leadership as thought leaders in the field.
iii. The article will be supported by digital display and mobile ads directing readers to GoFairfaxCity.com.

i. Future outreach considerations
i. Commissioners discussed potential expansion into podcasts and nontraditional media platforms to support tourism and visibility efforts.

ii. PR & Marketing Manager Jones indicated openness to exploring these opportunities, subject to staffing capacity and strategic alignment.
iii. Recent acquisition of new PR tools to better identify media and podcast outreach opportunities were noted.

j. Recognition and closing
i. Staff congratulated Secretary Mitchell Cho on being honored by the Washington Business Journal for Diversity in Business Leadership and noted plans to highlight the recognition through City communications.
ii. PR & Marketing Manager, Jones concluded the update and invited additional questions.

7. New Business
Commissioner's
a. Federal apprenticeship campaign:
i. Secretary Mitchell Cho announced that his company was recently awarded a federal contract to support a nationwide marketing campaign promoting registered apprenticeships.
ii. The campaign will be conducted in partnership with the United States Department of Labor and will focus on promoting apprenticeships as an alternative pathway to traditional college education.
iii. The commissioner noted that the federal government is placing renewed emphasis on workforce development initiatives and apprenticeship programs, and that increased federal hiring activity may follow.

8. Public Comment
a. Recognition of OTFBA leadership
i. A representative of the Fairfax City Chamber of Commerce publicly commended the leadership of Tina Disch, Executive Director of the Old Town Fairfax Business Association (OTFBA).
ii. It was noted that OTFBA has successfully increased business engagement and participation in community initiatives, including networking events and collaboration among Old Town business owners.

b. Fairfax City Chamber of Commerce, membership growth
i. A representative reported significant membership growth over the past several years and noted that it now exceeds membership levels of several neighboring chambers in the region.
ii. Approximately eight years ago, when leadership transitioned, the Chamber had about 85 members and faced reputational challenges; today, it is widely recognized as a growing and active organization.
iii. Appreciation was expressed for the support provided by the City and the Economic Development Authority.

c. Chamber international trip announcement
i. A representative of the Chamber announced an upcoming international trip to Tuscany scheduled for September 22–30.
ii. The trip will include visits to destinations such as Florence and Pisa and is open to both Chamber members and non-members.

d. Economic Development Summit announcement

i. Kurt Hoffman Memorial Economic Development Summit was announced, scheduled for April 17 at the Hilton Garden Inn Fairfax.
ii. Confirmed speakers include Catherine Read, Mayor of the City of Fairfax.
iii. Invitations have also been extended to Jeff McKay, Chairman of the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors, and Gerry Connolly, U.S. Representative for Virginia's 11th Congressional District.
iv. Potential participation from the U.S. Chamber of Commerce is also being explored.

e. Restaurant week promotion
   i. Commissioners and attendees were encouraged to support Fairfax City Restaurant Week by patronizing participating restaurants.
   ii. The program was noted as an important initiative that helps boost restaurant revenue during the winter season.

f. Additional discussion topics:
   i. There was discussion on a proposed legislation that would enable development of a casino in Tysons.
   ii. Commissioner's noted that the proposal is currently moving forward as enabling legislation through the Virginia General Assembly.
   iii. The potential economic implications, including the possibility of conference and meeting space associated with the proposal were discussed.
   iv. Some members noted that additional conference capacity could have economic development value in the region, though the casino component generated concerns among several participants.
   v. Commissioners also noted that the City of Fairfax does not have land capacity for a development of that scale.
   vi. No formal position or action was taken, and commissioners indicated the topic may warrant further discussion in the future
   vii. Commissioners also referenced a potential future discussion related to the Sherwood Community Center redevelopment concept in the City.
   viii. Staff indicated that any discussion on the matter should first be reviewed internally before being brought forward for public discussion by the Authority.

9. Adjournment – Meeting adjourned at 7:35 pm

*****Next Meeting: April 7, 2026*****
6 pm, 10306 Eaton Place, Training Room 115AB, Fairfax, Va, 22030
Subject to Change. Please Check gofairfaxcity.com for more information.