

LABQUEST Minutes for Wednesday, April 9, 2025

Announcement: The next in-person LABQUEST meeting will be Wednesday, May 14, 2025 at 12:30 in the Board Room at the White Oak Medical Center.

April 9 Meeting: We thank WOMC for hosting the meeting. Everyone introduced themselves. There were multiple special guests, which will be identified below.

White Oak Medical Center (WOMC)

John Sackett was one of the special guests. John is the President/CEO of Adventist HealthCare.

John primarily focused on the Maryland Total Cost of Care (TCOC) Model, which was originally designed to improve healthcare and reduce costs across the state. The TCOC was built on the Maryland All-Payer Model, which sets a limit on per capita hospital expenses. The All-Payer Model was launched in 2014 to reduce Medicare hospital expenditures. Under it, hospitals receive a fixed amount of revenue for the upcoming year based upon the population of those on Medicare and Medicaid.

John indicated that when the TCOC started in 2014, it worked well. However, over time the rules have changed so that it no longer works. Some hospitals get substantially more revenue on a per capita basis than others. It does not provide payment equity, especially for service to low-income patients. John also noted that it has gotten so complex that no one fully understands it, or how to fix it, including hospitals. He said that if they were Sibley Hospital in DC, they would have received \$84M more income.

The TCOC restricts WOMC to the number of procedures they can perform per year for a given treatment and get paid. In one case, they are only allowed 100 procedures, yet they have the staff, facilities and public demand for more than 200. In addition to limiting treatment to patients, it also discourages doctors from wanting to work here. The reduced income also restricts the hospital's ability to build the needed facilities or hire needed staff.

John is in favor of the legislature scrapping the entire TCOC system and instead transitioning to a fee-for-service system. Last month, Anthony Stahl noted that such a conversion would take a year or so, but emphasized that it is needed.

On March 12, 2025, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid (CMS) announced their intention to end the Maryland TCOC, effective at the end of the year.

Rob Richardson, a community member and director with LAQUEST, indicated the group has supported TCOC being scrapped and that we plan to meet with our state delegates and senators in a few months.

Rob also reminded everyone to view the October 2, 2023 Montgomery County Council joint Public Safety Committee and Health & Human Services Committee meeting at montgomerycountymd.granicus.com/GeneratedAgendaViewer.php?view_id=169&clip_id=16939.

As a refresher, that session dealt with a different but related set of issues. Their focus was on the 911 response time and emergency department wait times in hospitals. Charts provided in Appendix 2 show that in Maryland patients spend an average 239 minutes (almost 4 hours) in the ER. Among the states and territories, only Puerto Rico and DC have longer wait times.

Referring back to the link referenced above, charts in the staff report showed the wait times by hospital in Maryland. In June-August 2023 the median “ER arrival to inpatient admission” at the WOMC ranged from 825 minutes (almost 14 hours) to 1225 minutes (20+ hours), the third from the longest wait time in Maryland. While the lack of staffing is surely part of the problem, we think the primary reason for the long wait is the lack of beds in the hospital, which delays moving patients out of the ER. Similarly, the ER “arrival to discharge” wait time at the WOMC was around 450 minutes (7.5 hours), the longest in the state. The lack of beds also impacts this area since there is limited space and staff to screen new patients because they still need to care for those waiting to be admitted.

Anthony Stahl has indicated multiple times in past LABQUEST meetings that WOMC has done everything they can within the restrictions imposed on them by the state to shorten the above wait times. Since WOMC opened, they have been operating at over 100% of capacity. Recall that WOMC had originally requested 270 beds but the state allowed only 170 beds. During Covid WOMC was able to add some beds by moving some offices to the pavilion and added another 30 beds about two months ago, bringing the total to 230. Even with those beds, WOMC is still operating at over 100% of capacity. WOMC indicated last month that they still need 70 beds to accommodate the current need. The lack of beds at WOMC and other hospitals in the area explains why ambulances often divert to hospitals other than the nearest (which was the original purpose of the October 2023 Council meeting). This need will only increase when Viva White Oak starts being occupied.

As a summary on this subject from LABQUEST meetings over the last two years, the state restrictions cause the multiple issues identified above, which can be addressed by:

- Changing to a fee-for-service model so that hospitals have the resources they need to provide the beds and facilities required to serve the public, as well as hire needed staff.
- Eliminating TCOC restrictions on the number and type of procedures that can be performed at the hospital.
- Allowing hospitals to build the number of patient rooms and other facilities needed to accommodate the public with reasonable wait times. This will also address ambulance diversions and long EMS turnaround time at a hospital.

John Sackett indicated at the meeting that WOMC currently has 42 beds devoted to rehab and that one way to address the current shortage of hospital patient beds is to move that department to another location on campus. Last month, Anthony Stahl indicated that the state had given them permission to use the 6th floor of the pavilion, after previously rejecting that request many times.

John Sackett also indicated that technology is improving health care. For example, AI is being trained to read various types of images and as a result improve the accuracy. John also indicated that doctors’ least favorite task is documenting results. Technology is coming that would pick up what is said during patient visits and at other times, and record it in the patient database, thus reducing the doctor’s time of documenting results. Charles Warr, LABQUEST Science advisor, noted that much more such technology is coming soon.

Lee Summerfield, an occasional visitor/guest, was also in attendance at the meeting. She lives in Riderwood and represents them on a WOMC committee addressing patient care. Riderwood has approximately 1800 independent living units (2400 individuals) and another 400 individuals in assisted, memory, and skilled nursing units. The median age of these 2800 seniors is around 85, which translates to frequent hospital visits. Some 4% of the beds at WOMC are used by Riderwood residents. Note that Riderwood has about half of the seniors living in this area who live in large facilities that feed into WOMC. Lee indicated that when the committee was first formed shortly after the hospital opened, Riderwood residents had many complaints, but now complaints are rare because the WOMC has done a great job addressing them.

Viva White Oak (VWO)

Carlos Bonner reported that on May 29 they hope to receive Planning Board approval for the three master-planned roads, which means the staff report would be available sometime the week of May 19. After that, they can get the necessary permits and start construction, as planned in November 2025.

Carlos indicated they are working with the county executive to get Tax Increment Financing (TIF) approved. TIF is a public financing method that is used to subsidize redevelopment, infrastructure, and other community-improvement projects. The basic principle of TIF is to use the future gains in taxes to finance the current improvements that will create those gains. Bonds are sold to investors. The investors, not the county, would be liable if the project is not successful.

The County Executive is preparing the TIF legislation to submit to the Council for approval. This will be the first time a TIF will be used in the county. MCB is preparing information materials to inform the public.

MCB is talking with multiple potential tenants (retail, housing, grocery, and fitness). They hope that the first residential building will be ready to occupy in 2028.

Rob Richardson and Dan Wilhelm reported that the Planning Board reviewed the results of a DOT study of improvement alternatives along Old Columbia Pike/Prosperity Dr between Cherry Hill Road and Stewart Lane. The Board supported the planning staff recommendation of Alternative 2. That alternative would require rebuilding the long-closed bridge over the Paint Branch stream and consists of two vehicle travel lanes, sidewalks and bikeways. The DOT study failed to provide capacity needed to support Viva White Oak or to address long-standing safety issues at the intersections with Industrial Pkwy and Tech Road. Dan Wilhelm testified at the April 3 hearing and indicated, among other things, that sometime after November 2025 MCB plans to design and build improvements under the Local Area Transportation Improvement Program (LATIP).

We were also joined by two special guests from Bangalore, India, Leena Thomas and her husband, Shibu Thomas. Leena and Shibu are in Philadelphia this week visiting their daughter. Leena's company, Global Business Inroads, Ltd, became involved in connecting international stakeholders to our planned VIVA White Oak biomedical center years ago, after the trade mission trip by then County Executive Leggett, at which time, Montgomery County entered into a formal International Sister Cities relationship with Hyderabad, India. Leena has visited LABQUEST before, and has come to Montgomery County previously to participate in efforts to bring international biomedical stakeholders to VIVA White Oak. Carlos and Team MCB have had a number of virtual meetings with Leena and Shibu to discuss international collaborative opportunities. Leena indicated that those international stakeholders are attracted to VIVA White Oak because of its adjacency to FDA HQ. Leena also floated the idea of a doctor exchange program (short periods of time) with WOMC to foster an information exchange about state-of-the-art best medical practices used in each country.

Science Report

Charles reviewed several items from the April 4 Science Report:

- He is concerned about the increase in measles cases. Measles is the most contagious disease, which is 13 times worse than covid. If a sick person walks through a space, others using that space for the next two hours would be contaminated. The US is approaching the point where the number of cases will grow exponentially. Since not everyone can be vaccinated, herd immunity is needed, which means that at least 95% of the population needs to be vaccinated.

- FDA has authorized marketing of the CORIS System to clean endoscopes.
- FDA has granted marketing authorization to Visby Medical (San Jose) for a home test for Chlamydia, Gonorrhea And Trichomoniasis. This test would be self-administered and results would be available in less than 30 minutes.
- Marty Makary was confirmed as the new FDA Commissioner. He is a widely published researcher from Johns Hopkins.
- The Senate confirmed Jay Bhattacharya as the next director of the National Institutes of Health (NIH).
- There has been a cat food recall due to the potential of it spreading bird flu.
- There is a way to easily turn two of your favorite starchy, carbohydrate-heavy, calorie loaded foods (rice and potatoes) from gut-bombs into a healthier alternative.
- There is an Eagle Cam for a nest in Big Bear Valley, CA
- The new, ultramodern opera house in Pristina, Kosovo is solar powered.

FDA and GSA

Benjamin Dunkenfield attended from FDA and indicated some of the new DOGE proposed facilities planning processes are not working because needed staff have been let go.

Montgomery County

Jewru Bandeh reported the following:

- The local governments in the area have developed a web site where individuals recently affected by the federal workforce reductions can find information about various kinds of assistance.
- There are hearings this week concerning the county operating budget.
- There was a public meeting on April 8 concerning US29 BRT Phase 2. That effort will result in a 35% design for running the BRT in one or two dedicated median lanes (depending on the segment) between Industrial Pkwy and Silver Spring Metro Station.
- Thomas Taylor, MCPS superintendent, will be the featured speaker at the ECCAB meeting this evening. (Note that MCPS will need to decide where and how to accommodate the students from Viva White Oak since the existing schools that serve that area are already near or over capacity.)

Submitted by Dan Wilhelm