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Talbot County Announces Merger of Economic Development and Tourism

The Talbot County Council has announced that it will merge its offices of economic development and tourism to form a single department.

Cassandra Vanhooser, who currently serves as tourism director, has been tapped to lead the new Talbot County Department of Economic Development and Tourism.

Vanhooser assumed the role of tourism director in February 2013 after many years as a travel writer. Since coming to Talbot County, she has overseen the remaking of the county's image as a premier travel destination. The Office of Tourism has redesigned its website, expanded its presence on social media, and partnered with *Chesapeake Bay* Magazine to develop a widely circulated destination guide for the county.

In 2015, the Talbot County Office of Tourism won the Maryland Office of Tourism Development's Visit Maryland Award for outstanding investment and performance in improving and promoting Maryland's image as a travel destination. The office also recently won the Maryland Tourism Coalition's 2016 Visionary Impact Award for its efforts in hosting travel writers and destination representatives in Talbot County for a three-day conference and familiarization trip this past September.

Before coming to Talbot County, Vanhooser spent more than 14 years as a travel and features writer at *Southern Living* magazine, where she first covered Georgia, then Virginia, Maryland, Delaware, and Washington, D.C. She also served as the magazine's football editor and wrote the narrative sections of *Southern Living's Official SEC Tailgating Cookbook*. She is a winner of the prestigious Lowell Thomas Travel Journalism Award for excellence in travel writing.

"I have traveled the world, and I truly believe Talbot County's is one of the most beautiful and special places in the United States," Vanhooser says. "A strong business community ensures that both residents and visitors alike will enjoy this place we love so much for generations to come."

Samuel Shoge also joins the department as economic development coordinator.

A native of Chestertown, Shoge currently serves on the Chestertown Town Council and has served on the Chestertown Planning Commission. He is one of the founders of the Kent County Chamber of Commerce Young Professionals, where he helped grow membership and engage working professionals to get them involved in the community.

In addition to his public service, Shoge previously worked as assistant director of the Office of Admissions at Washington College. He also chaired the government relations committee for the Potomac and Chesapeake Association for College Admission Counseling where he lobbied the Maryland state legislature for higher education initiatives.

“I was raised on the Eastern Shore, and I have chosen to stay on the Eastern Shore,” Shoge says. “This is where I am most at home. I have always been a champion of the people I serve, and I will be a champion for Talbot County. I look forward to meeting with our businesses and learning more about their industries and specific needs.”

The Talbot County Council believes it makes sense to more closely align the efforts of economic development and tourism both of which share marketing and communications as foundations. Research shows that the perception of an area’s business climate is positively influenced by marketing to leisure travelers. People who choose Talbot County as a vacation destination may also be potential business leads.

Further, the visitor economy supports quality-of-life amenities that attract investment from other business sectors. Talbot County has a terrific culinary scene, beautiful accommodations, amazing arts and culture, and a wealth of activities that not only appeal to visitors, but also make this a great place to live and work.

“We look forward to the energy and collaboration the new structure will bring to this department,” says Talbot County Council President Corey Pack. “We have built a department that we believe can help us better support our business community and help lead us toward a bright future. Cassandra and Sam will make a great team. Talbot County is open for business!”

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