

Columbia County
Board of County Commissioners

Minutes of
February 19, 2026

The Columbia County Board of County Commissioners met in a regular scheduled meeting in the auditorium of the School Board Administrative Complex at 05:30 P.M. The meeting opened with Prayer and the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America followed.

Commissioners in Attendance: Chairman, Timothy Murphy
Commissioner, Robbie Hollingsworth
Commissioner, Kevin Parnell
Commissioner, Everett Phillips
Commissioner, Rocky Ford

Others in Attendance: County Manager, David Kraus ("CM")
Assistant County Manager Kevin Kirby (ACM")
County Attorney, Joel Foreman
Deputy Clerk, Melissa Williams
Landscape & Parks Director, Clint Pittman
Public Information Officer, Dennis Rivera
Director of Human Resources, Kari Guy
County Purchasing Officer, Erica Jones
Economic Development Director, Jennifer Daniels

Agenda Additions/Deletions:

Additions: County Manager, David Kraus added 2 additions; Amendment 101 and Elevate Florida. Commissioner Rocky Ford added 1 addition for discussion; South end of the County EMS services.

Deletions: None.

MOTION by Commissioner, Hollingsworth to approve the agenda with the additions. SECOND by Commissioner, Ford. The motion carried unanimously.

Proclamations:

Chairman, Timothy Murphy

- 1) Proclamation No. 2026P-04 -The week of February 21st to February 26th, 2026, is National FFA Week. The FFA National Flag will be flown in front of the Columbia County Courthouse this week.

MOTION by Commissioner, Phillips to approve Proclamation No. 2026P-04 The week of February 21st-February 26th, 2026, is National FFA Week. SECOND by Commissioner, Hollingsworth. The motion carried unanimously.

County Attorney, Joel Foreman

- 2) Proclamation No. 2026P-05- Proclaiming Black History Month

MOTION by Commissioner, Phillips to approve Proclamation No. 2026P-05- Proclaiming Black History Month. SECOND by Commissioner, Parnell. The motion carried unanimously.

- 3) Proclamation No. 2026P-03- is Hazardous Materials Awareness Week

MOTION by Commissioner, Phillips to approve Proclamation No. 2026P-03 is Hazardous Materials Awareness Week February 23rd to March 01st 2026. SECOND by Commissioner Hollingsworth. The motion carried unanimously.

Presentation of the Board not requiring Board vote or action:

Kimi Roberts, Communication & Events Specialist

- (1) America 250 Update- City and County coming together to celebrate the 250th Birthday of the USA. There were 25 grants awarded from the Governor across the State of Florida and Columbia County was awarded one for \$40,000.00. There will be an opening ceremony at the gazebo in Olustee Park on 02/24/2026 @11:00 A.M.

Lisa Lee, Columbia County School Systems spoke about how each school is doing activity to celebrate the 250th Birthday of the USA. Students from Richardson Middle School spoke about freedom and sang songs about freedom.

Troy Roberts, Suwannee River Water Management District

(2) Presentation by Troy Roberts, Suwannee River Water Management District about the Water First North Florida Project.

(See attached documents and PowerPoints)

Hugh Thomas
Dr. Amy Brown
Charlie Keith
Catlin Potter

Project – No Board vote on this tonight. We do intend to have a Regional Town Hall meeting in the future.

Dr. Amy Brown – Project Manager for Water First North Florida

Background -plan for the future.

2023 recent update and Agriculture.

Dr. Amy Brown made a comment that water use makes an impact on both Districts. Showing a slide how we have been able to keep our water usage at a normal growth.

North Florida has reached an important crossroads for protecting the long-term viability of the natural resources that make our region unique and serve as our primary source of water supply.

Water First North Florida is the most effective and cost-efficient solution to protect our natural water systems and support our long-term water supply.

See the email that is attached sent to County Manager, David Kraus from Tyler Winburn, Legislative and Government Affairs Coordinator for Suwannee River Water Management District.

Dr. Amy Brown talking about the technology being successfully used across Florida.

The Florida Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) has proposed Ichetucknee River Highway 27 and Santa Fe River-lower part Hwy441 we need to recover those systems. Plan to allow for future growth. Florida laws require minimum flows & water (MFLs) to be established to protect water bodies from significant harm due to groundwater pumping.

Current target for both locations to recharge and put water back into the aquifer. Recover the flow so we can meet the future demands.

How Water First North Florida will work with recycled Water:

Highly treated water at the water reclamation facility.

Filtration in wetland to further clean water.

Meets high-quality water standards.

Recharges the aquifer & restores flow to springs and rivers.

After evaluating numerous alternatives, the Water First project was identified as the most effective and cost-efficient solution. This project will utilize high-quality reclaimed water and further treat it through a wetland filtration system before recharging it to the Floridian Aquifer. Water First North Florida will provide over 40 million gallons of water per day and work in conjunction with conservation and other efforts to restore the hydrology of the Lower Santa Fe and the Ichetucknee rivers and springs.

The Florida Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) has proposed MFLs for the Lower Santa Fe and Ichetucknee River (LSFIR), which are not being met. DEP is developing a recovery and prevention strategy to meet the MFLs while the growing needs for the region.

The Solutions: Water First North Florida

After evaluating numerous alternatives, the Water First project was identified as the most effective and cost-efficient solution. This project will utilize high-quality reclaimed water and further treat it through a wetland filtration system before recharging it to the Floridan Aquifer. Water First North Florida will provide over 40 million gallons of water per day and work in conjunction with conservation and other efforts to restore the hydrology of the lower Santa Fe and Ichetucknee rivers and springs.

The Water First North aquifer recharge project will benefit our region and our state by:

Providing the most cost-effective, long-term solution with the greatest environmental benefit.

Replenishing the aquifer and restoring flows to protect the region's river and springs.

Ensuring a sustainable water supply for the region's current and future needs.

Supporting agriculture, small businesses, tourism and economic development.

Restoring wetlands that support wildlife habitats and recreational opportunities that Florida residents and visitors can enjoy.

Water First North Florida uses proven technology being successfully used across Florida:

1. Advanced Treatment- Recycled water is highly treated at a water reclamation facility.
2. Natural Filtration- Water undergoes additional natural filtering through construction wetlands.
3. Quality Assurance- Meets high water quality standards and is regularly tested and monitored.
4. Aquifer Recharge – Clean water replenishes the Floridan Aquifer, restoring natural flows to our springs and rivers.

This process eliminates non-beneficial surface water discharge while putting clean water back into the ground in a smart, natural way.

Discussion ensued:

They spoke about the JEA Buckman Ozone Wetland Pilot Study.

Test and Evaluate the Ozone and the treatment.

Staz Guntek, Legislative & Intergovernmental Affairs Coordinator, Columbia County. Government update as of right now it is a one-line item- Budget 20 million dollars to this -2 weeks ago, house side only on paper for the Senate.

Chairman, Timothy Murphy made the comment that the dollar amount will be high. Nothing that will start in the next 30 days, right now looking into the future.

Citizen Comment:

- 1) Carol Eckert- offered a comment.

- 2) Moses Cleppner- offered a comment
- 3) Hailey Hall – offered a comment
- 4) Dr. John Rowe – offered a comment
- 5) Marlee Gibson – offered a comment
- 6) Dee Patak- offered a comment
- 7) Nathanael Warner – offered a comment
- 8) Bruce Dicks – offered a comment
- 9) Josie Gaskins- offered a comment

Chairman, Timothy Murphy stated that we do have a voice in the County. Florida has challenges, we do have a voice on the ballot.

Commissioner, Kevin Parnell stated that we do not want your waste here. Keep it in Jacksonville.

Commissioner, Rocky Ford made a comment that he would like more information. Why did they stop it in Saint Johns River? Monitor the flow of the springs and bring it up to the limit. Could be the drought?

SRWM, Hugh Thomas made a comment about a permit to regulate and pull water out of the river. We do not have a permit to pull water out of the river at this time there is no project currently.

Commissioner, Kevin Parnell made a comment about our rivers, and the only time was when the rivers were flooded.

SRWM, Hugh Thomas talked about Senate Bill 64 it is Senate Albritton's bill, and that it affects all utilities across the state to eliminate the discharged value of the water itself. Growth limits the water supply. Right now, we are below the river water level limit.

Commissioner, Rocky Ford made a comment about the flow level from the Hurricanes or the drought?

Dr. Amy Brown made a comment to see in the drought systems floods. Ichetucknee remains in the low levels.

Commissioner, Rocky Ford made a comment about the flow level now in the Ichetucknee River. Dr. Amy Brown stated it is at 300 CFS and the long-term flow.

Kevin Parnell asked a question about the Desalinization Plant.

Dr. Amy Brown stated they are very expensive

Discussion ensued.

Commissioner, Robby Hollingsworth made a comment about the amount of toilet water that has prescription drugs in them in the Gulf Coast, Cedar Keys to Tallahassee. They had blood pressure and depressant drugs, 1 of out every 4 fish are not healthy, from areas like Cedar Key, Gulf Coast, Apalachicola to Tallahassee you cannot treat that out. A 3-year study was done on bonefish, and they are leaving this area because of the drugs in the water from toilet water. SWRM water 210-million-gallon 60% toilet water. Farmers do about 64% and it is on the ground. We only put 15 million gallons in a day but are going to receive 55 million. He spoke about St. Johns water management talked about back in 2009 about 5 different sites for a desalination plant in Jacksonville. JEA -City of Jacksonville – under the Florida aquifer. The cost was around 650 million to a billion dollars for the plants to be built.

Discussion ensued.

Dr. Amy Brown made a comment that the desalination plants to build are around 2-3 billion dollars.

Commissioner, Robby Hollingsworth spoke about the aquifer being used for everything for Florida. Free up the natural flow to our springs. Money is not everything. Use the rivers to rebuild themselves.

Commissioner, Everett Phillips made a comment that he agreed with Commissioner, Robby Hollingsworth. Is the aquifer in Florida level?

Dr. Amy Brown stated that it is high in the aquifer.

Commissioner, Rocky Ford stated that there is already desalination plant.

Chairman, Timothy Murphy stated that money is not the problem, Economic growth is good. There are 1.3 million people a year moving to Florida. This is a serious issue for our future. Thanks to SRWM on the research they have been

doing. Georgia has been dumping human waste in the river for years. Find alternate methods to do this. Doing your studies there is money out there.

Commissioner, Robby Hollingsworth made a comment thanking SRWM, if something goes wrong make the right system.

Chairman, Timothy Murphy thanking SRWM and Hugh Thomas for listening and we may not agree on everything, but we have a good group.

Commissioner, Rocky Ford made the comment to get the septic tanks off the river.

SRWM team thanked the Board members for the opportunity of being here. Research must be done and bring back the facts.

Commissioner, Kevin Parnell made a comment that we do not want this here in our County.

Chairman, Timothy Murphy made a comment to take a 5-minute break. Time is 07:40 P.M.

Chairman, Timothy Murphy called meeting back to order. Time was 07:50 P.M.

Consent Agenda:

MOTION by Commissioner Ford to approve the consent agenda. SECOND by Commissioner Hollingsworth. The motion carried unanimously.

- 1) BCC Administration – Interlocal Agreement Amendment One – Career Source North Central Florida
- 2) BCC Administration – Release of Lien Agreement-Benjamin Basset
- 3) BCC Administration- Release of Lien Agreement- Joy Romano
- 4) BCC Finance – BA 26-23 – Sheriff’s Security Improvements- \$35,000.00
- 5) County Attorney- Burn Ban Update- Resolution No. 2026R-03
- 6) Finance- Bill and Vouchers – 02/10/2026 - \$ 5,351,612.00
- 7) Finance- Bills and Vouchers- 02/01/2026 - \$1,317,265.00

8) Public Works- Special Olympics Florida

9) Public Works – Utility Permit from Mastec requesting to install cable on SW Cypress Lake Road

10) Public Works – Utility Permit from Comcast requesting to install cable on NW Lake Jeffery Road

11) Public Works – Utility Permit – Comcast requesting to install a cable on SW Prosperity Place

12) Public Works – Utility Permit – Comcast requesting to install a cable on SW County Road

13) Public Works – Utility Permit – Cox Cable requesting to install a cable on NW Harris Loop

14) Public Works – Utility Permit from Mastec requesting to install cable on NW Suwanee Valley Road

15) Public Works – Utility Permit – from Comcast requesting to install cable on SW Windswept Gln

16) Public Works – Utility Permit – Hargray of Florida requesting to install a cable at on SE Hedge Place.

17) Public Works – Utility Permit from Comcast requesting to install cable on NW Lake Jeffery Road

18) Zoning Department – Special Family Lot Permit request (SFLP260201) by Pamela Pettyjohn for her daughter, Heather Crawford- District 5

MOTION by Commissioner Ford to adopt the consent agenda. SECOND by Commissioner Hollingsworth. The motion carried unanimously.

Discussion and Action items:

Joel Foreman, County Attorney

(1) BA-26-24- Interlocal Agreement- Acquisition of the Old TD Bank Building – Tax Collector- \$ 795,000.00

At the February 5, 2026, meeting, the Commissioners reviewed the interlocal agreement for the Acquisition of the Old TD Bank Building for the Tax Collector and approved funds for the due diligence. The County will provide funds for the Tax Collector to purchase the building.

Approving Interlocal Agreement for the Purchase of the Old TD Bank Building for the Tax Collector and BA 26-24.

Kyle Keen, Tax Collector spoke about the 3-step process:

Growth of the office

300-400 a day customer

80,000 -90,000 customers in a year

There are 1.3 million people moving to Florida this year.

In the parking lot, space is needed for growth.

TD Bank Building 7,800 square feet.

Will have 5 drive thru lines.

\$800,000.00-we laid it out

Will also have 15 clerk stations.

Parking lot will have 41 parking spots and 20 spots for employees.

Building price is \$800,000.00

Remodeling price is \$651,634.00

Parking Lot price is \$485,000.00

Phase 1 is to acquire the building which is \$800,000.00-Ground Floor

Phase 2 will be in October 2026 which will include the remodel and the parking lot.

Joel Foreman, County Attorney spoke about repaying the County and the Board will be the bank. The Board is not buying the building you are the bank.

Commissioner, Rocky Ford made a comment that they cannot move in till the remodel to move in is done. How long till the plans are done?

Kyle Keen, Tax Collector stated yes, that the plans are done and can go out to bid.

David Kraus, County Manager stated that it would be 60-90 days to go out to bid.

Kyle Keen, Tax Collector stated they could not do the parking lot. Would like to do it all.

Commissioner, Everett Phillips made a comment that he looked at the plans, little high on the construction part. Agrees with the parking space.

Timothy Murphy, Chairman stated that Kyle Keen, Tax collector did the thing we as the Board had asked. Reach out to the Clerk of Court's office. Prefers 15 years, the agreement is with the office.

Joel Foreman, County Attorney made a comment that the interlocal is for a 6-year term. Motion made tonight will be 15 years term acquisition.

Commissioner, Rocky Ford stated to approve it all, we will be in next year's budget.

Joel Foreman, County Attorney stated that on the interlocal agreement 3.7 is left blank. See attached documents of the Interlocal Agreement. 6 year term.

Timothy Murphy, Chairman stated to put a \$2 million dollar cap on it.

Rocky Ford, County Commissioner asked if you could take the money be taken out of the contingency funds?

David Kraus, County Manager, stated yes.

Kevin Parnell, County Commissioner made a comment about the remodeling being done this year.

Kyle Keen, Tax Collector stated he is getting bids now.

Timothy Murphy, Chairman made a comment to consult someone that can walk Kyle Keen through it.

Kyle Keen, Tax Collector stated that 30 days to close then send out the quotes and bids.

Discussion ensued.

MOTION by Chairman, Timothy Murphy to adopt the interlocal agreement between the Board and the Tax Collector's office for the purchase and maintenance of the TD Bank Building. 1) 2.6 was amended to reflect 15 years and not 6 years of the maintenance agreement for the building. 2) 3.6 and 3.7 change to 3.8 amended to \$1.5 up to \$2 million cap from cash reserve. 3) and to adopt BA 26-24 to move the funds. SECOND by Commissioner Ford. The motion carried unanimously.

Rocky Ford, Commissioner made a comment that he spoke to Columbia EMS about putting another ambulance at the fire station in Fort White.

The old Health Department is also vacant and could also be used. Columbia EMS agreed to pay the light bill.

Joel Foreman, County Attorney made the comment they could amend the lease agreement and set the final report.

MOTION by Commissioner Ford to approve Columbia EMS to place ambulance in the Fort White location to cover the south County area. SECOND by Chairman, Timothy Murphy. The motion carried unanimously.

Kevin Kirby, Assistant County Manager

Award 2025-15 for the 2025-2026 Annual Resurfacing – D3- Project. This includes milling existing pavement of approximately 12,850 LF (2.43 miles) of t/-20' wide roadway, finishing the milled surface, and placement of new asphalt pavement – 165 lbs./sy.

(See attached memorandum)

MOTION by Commissioner Hollingsworth to approve awarding Bid 2025-15 to Anderson Columbia Co. Inc. and approve the Construction Agreement in the proposed amount of \$634,330.89. SECOND by Commissioner, Phillips. The motion carried unanimously.

David Kraus, County Manager

Economic Development Agreement – Equipment share

This item is an Agreement with Equipment Share to implement an economic incentive package previously approved by the County Commissioners. This Agreement includes:

- 75% Tax Rebate on real property

- 50% Tax Rebate on Tangible Property
- Up to \$80,000.00 to construct a sewer main under US-90

MOTION by Commissioner Ford to approve the Economic Development Agreement with Equipment Share. SECOND by Commissioner, Hollingsworth. The motion carried unanimously.

Request to set Workshop:

Request to set up a community open/house for the Overlay Corridors on 3/25/2026. Additionally, the Board discussed a possible workshop at the January 15, 2026, meeting.

February 25, 2026 – Planning & Zoning has a workshop planned.

March 19, 2026 – Vulnerability Grant-after the BOCC meeting- Brandon Stubbs

March 25, 2026 – Overlay Corridors Study- TDC Building – Kimley-Horn

David Kraus said that these are proposed workshops and dates. Board requested the corridor meeting be before the regular BOCC meeting on 03/19/2026.

Timothy Murphy, Chairman made a comment about setting up a Major Workshop about utilities.

Commissioners – Columbia County
Suwannee County Board
NFWUA

Town of Fort White

DEP- as soon as possible- run an ad in the paper and see if we can use the Library at Florida Gateway College.

David Kraus, County Manager stated that we could do it in the evening of March 5, 2026.

Kevin Kirby, Assistant County Manager had a meeting today about permits.

George Thomas, Mayor of Fort White, made a comment for David Kraus, County Manager to let him know the date, time and where so himself and his council members can attend.

Timothy Murphy, Chairman made the comment that we will notify you about the workshop.

Joel Foreman, County Attorney confirmed that the ad in the newspaper must run for 1 week in advance.

David Kraus, County Manager made a comment that once everything was set up for the workshop, he would run the ad in the newspaper.

MOTION by Commissioner, Robby Hollingsworth to approve workshops dates and times. SECOND by Commissioner, Ford. The motion carried unanimously.

Reimbursement to North Florida Utility Authority for Emergency Repairs-minus sales tax.

(See attached forms)

A water main in the Town of Fort White failed and the North Florida Utility Authority, along with the County, had to make emergency repairs This item is the reimbursement to North Florida Utility Authority for emergency repairs, minus the sales tax.

Chairman, Timothy Murphy made a comment that this amount will be deducted from \$100,000.00 budget repairs this money will come out of that.

David Kraus, County Manager, answered yes.

MOTION by Commissioner, Hollingsworth to approve the reimbursement. SECOND by Commissioner, Phillips. The motion carried unanimously.

Additions:

1) **Amendment 101- FY 2025-26 – LSH Health Systems.** Revise PO language under Section 4.1.1 and 4.1.2. remove exemption of DCF Clearinghouse Level 2 Employment screening standards per Fla. Stat. for EMS and LEO, retro to 11/01/2025.

See attached agreement)

David Kraus, County Manager stated this is just a change in the language.

MOTION by Commissioner, Parnell to approve the language on Amendment 101- FY 2025-2026. SECOND by Commissioner, Ford. The motion carried unanimously.

2) Elevate Florida Acquisition and Demolition Agreements:

The County won't be responsible for any of the cost associated with the property up until the closeout of the project and then the County will be responsible for maintaining open space in the perpetuity.

(See attached agreement)

Timothy Murphy made a comment that when it is all done with FEMA this property will be in the County's name.

David Kraus, County Manager stated yes.

Joel Foreman made a comment that this surplus property and under a restricted covenant. Push them on the tax roll and make an inventory.

MOTION by Commissioner, Hollingsworth Elevate Florida Acquisition and Demolition Agreements. SECOND by Commissioner Ford. The motion carried unanimously.

Open Public Comments and/or Questions:

Members of the public offering comment were:

- Kelly Brown – speaking about a young girl getting hurt at the Rodeo Arena and the delay in emergency attention. Causes some serious concerns. The date of the accident was January 7th, 2026.
- Steven Bailey-EMS Services have failed and 90% did not meet the response.

Staff Comments:

Joel Foreman, County Attorney made a comment that a written complaint from Kelly and Dale Brown was received about the delay in EMS response.

Commissioner Comments:

Timothy Murphy, Chairman stated that he received the complaint and moved it to David Kraus, County Manager and Kevin Kirby, Assistant County Manager.

Lance Hill, Assistant Fire Chief was interviewed and delivered for review to David Kraus, County Manager.

Joel Foreman, County Attorney made a comment that this was a breach in the contract. He agrees with Mr. Steven Bailey and Ms. Kelly Brown. Careful about the 3rd party conversation. Ameri-pro back in contract and the level of care. Call an emergency meeting next week.

Updates from the County Manager:

David Kraus, County Manager stated that this is critical.

Commissioner, Kevin Parnell stated we need to address this issue about the EMS.

Commissioner, Kevin Parnell made a comment about Scott Stewart coming to the next scheduled meeting for an update on the Publix, half of a million dollars is a lot of money.

Adjournment:

There being no further business, the meeting adjourned at 08:58 P.M.

ATTEST:

Timothy Murphy, Chairman
Board of County Commissioners

James M. Swisher, Jr.
Clerk of Circuit Court