

Regular Meeting
Commission Board Room
Dixie County Courthouse
214 NE Hwy 351, Cross City, FL 32628
October 01, 2026 – 10:00 AM

The Board meetings are audio recorded. The public can hear and participate in the meeting via conference call by dialing 1 469-551-3616 and enter code 908-825-494#

COMMISSIONERS

Mark Hatch, District 3, Chairman
Jody Stephenson, District 1 – Not present
Daniel Wood, District 2
Jamie Storey, District 4, Vice Chairman
David Osteen, District 5

STAFF

John Jenkins, County Manager
Roy Bass, Assistant County Manager
Martha McCaskill, Administrative Asst/Grant Coordinator
Chana Watson, County Attorney
Barbie Higginbotham, Clerk of Court
Brenda Royal, Chief Financial Officer
Christie Zander, Deputy Clerk

CALL TO ORDER

Chairman Hatch welcomed the attendees, including the 4H students in the audience, and explained that he wanted them to see how county government operates and how tax dollars are spent. He asked attendees to silence their phones because the meeting was being recorded.

INVOCATION AND PLEDGE TO THE AMERICAN FLAG

Vice Chairman Storey led the Invocation and Commissioner Wood led the Pledge to the American Flag.

APPROVAL OF COMMISSION MINUTES

09/03/2026 Regular BOCC Minutes

Motion to approve the 09/03/2026 Budget Workshop Minutes made by Commissioner Osteen. Seconded by Vice Chairman Storey.

VOUCHER APPROVAL

Motion to approve the vouchers made by Commissioner Osteen. Seconded by Vice Chairman Storey. Board approved.

CONSTITUTIONAL OFFICERS/CITY OFFICIALS

Supervisor of Elections- Darbi Chaires

Mrs. Chaires reminded residents that October 5 was the last day to register to vote in the November 3 election. She said residents could register at any elections office in Florida or online. Online registration requires a driver's license number and the last four digits of the applicant's Social Security number.

Mrs. Chaires also invited the public to an October 5, 2026 at 6:00 p.m. presentation at the Women's Club about election integrity and voting-equipment security. She said attendees would be able to see a piece of voting equipment and learn about safeguards used to protect ballots. The event was open to the public, and she thought the Columbia County Elections Office might also participate.

Mrs. Chaires mentioned that she had been involved in 4-H as a young person and a leader and welcomed the students' interest in seeing the government process.

KATRINA VANAERNAM AND MELANIE ANDERSON, DIXIE COUNTY ANTI-DRUG COALITION

Not present.

NIKIE WAITS – ROAD 2 REDEMPTION

Ms. Waits reported on the organization's September 12 National Recovery Month event, "Lighting the Way Home." Approximately 130 people attended despite poor weather, and six resource vendors participated. The event included music, food, raffles, recovery testimonials, and awards recognizing people in recovery and those supporting recovery in the community. Nikki described the memorial walk and candlelight vigil honoring people lost to overdose and suicide as a particularly important part of the event.

Ms. Waits then presented findings from a 2026 community needs assessment with 91 responses. She reported that respondents identified substance use and addiction as the leading community challenge (85%), followed by mental health (71%) and housing and homelessness (56%). Other issues included employment, youth and behavioral concerns, transportation, reentry after incarceration, and family instability. Nikki said these challenges are connected: recovery can be difficult to maintain without safe housing, transportation, employment, mental-health support, or a healthy support system.

When asked what services Dixie County needs more of, respondents most often identified substance-use treatment (69%), recovery housing (63%), mental-health services (59%), and peer recovery support (56%). Ms. Waits said 68% reported that they did not know where to go to get help, making lack of information the leading barrier identified in the assessment—not transportation or cost. Only about 26% believed the county currently had enough local resources to support someone entering and sustaining recovery.

Ms. Waits said the results support stronger resource navigation, peer support, mental-health and substance-use services, youth intervention, reentry services, employment assistance, and safe recovery housing. She said Road to Redemption continued to explore a local "Dixie's

Redemption House” and other recovery services. She cautioned that the survey was not representative of every county resident but offered a useful snapshot of community concerns. She thanked the board for its support and emphasized the need for organizations to work together.

National 4-H Week

Lilian, a member of the Old Town Natives 4-H Club, said Dixie County had two 4-H clubs, 72 members, and seven volunteers. She described 4-H as a hands-on youth development program covering areas such as agriculture, STEM, healthy living, and civic engagement.

Sophie Hurst, of the Dixie Explorers, said she joined 4-H to learn new things, meet people, and try activities. She said 4-H had taught her responsibility, hard work, and confidence in trying new things.

Attorney Watson read a proclamation declaring October 4–10, 2026, National 4-H Week, with the theme “Beyond Ready.” The proclamation recognized the program’s role in helping young people develop skills and become engaged, successful, and independent.

Motion made by Vice-Chairman Storey to approve the proclamation. Seconded by Commissioner Osteen. Board approved.

- At the request of the 4-H representative Jessica Cooper, the board agreed to take a photograph with the students and recessed briefly.

KAY MCCALLISTER, TOURISM DEVELOPMENT COUNCIL

Mrs. McCallister explained that tourism funds are generated by a 3% tax on overnight stays at establishments such as Airbnbs, RV parks, and hotels. She emphasized that these funds are separate from the county’s general funds. She also explained that state law limits certain tourism-funded improvements to coastal or waterfront public lands.

Mrs. McCallister said the county had accumulated tourism funds and wanted to move forward with improvements at its parks. The first proposed project was at Gornto Springs, with an estimated cost of approximately **\$20,000**. Plans included relocating and improving the camp-host area, installing a pole barn, improving the park entrance, and addressing accessibility and other site improvements.

Roy Bass described the dock near the park entrance as partly submerged on one side and no longer floating level. He said several people had asked for an ADA-accessible way to reach the water without using the stairs. Roy said he would seek a design that addressed the dock and ramp together and complied with accessibility requirements. Karen added that signs and other miscellaneous improvements could also be included.

Motion by Commissioner Osteen to approve moving forward with the Gornto Springs improvements. Seconded by Vice-Chairman Storey. Board approved.

Pickleball Courts and Lighting

Mrs. McCallister requested approval to move forward with improvements to the pickleball courts, which were built over older tennis courts and had developed cracks that could create hazards. She said she would meet with people in Suwannee to discuss options and obtain bids.

Chairman Hatch asked that lighting improvements be included. He noted that crews had tried to address lighting problems at the locations but that better lighting was still needed. Roy Bass reported that another area light at DTRAC was turning on at night and interfering with the pickleball lights at one site. He said the lighting issue would need to be corrected. Mrs. McCallister agreed to add lighting at both locations to the project planning and said the work would be bid under county procedures.

Motion by Commissioner Osteen to approve the pickleball-court improvements Seconded by Vice-Chairman Storey. Board approved.

Primitive Camping at Joe Anderson Park

Mrs. McCallister reported that Adam Williamson of A&W Kayaks, who operates at Joe Anderson Park, had made improvements at the park and offered to help inspect playground equipment and other county park assets. She asked the board to allow primitive camping there.

Commissioners discussed whether camping should be operated through the same online reservation and payment system used at other county parks. Chairman Hatch said he did not want to undo the existing process, including its controls for handling cash, and supported proceeding only if Joe Anderson could be set up under the same program. The camping fee at the other parks was stated as \$10 plus a \$3 fee.

The discussion also covered the need for insurance, a designated camping area, and a site plan. Leon Wright was asked to review the site plan, including to ensure the proposed area was suitable and not in a flood-prone location. The chair clarified that the approval was to establish camping under the existing county program, but not to begin accepting campers before the required arrangements were complete.

Motion by Commissioner Wood to allow primitive camping at Joe Anderson Park under the same reservation, payment, and operating program used at the other county parks, with the camp host responsible for operations and subject to site-plan and insurance requirements. Seconded by Commissioner Osteen. Board approved.

Anderson Crossroads Harvest Festival

Mrs. McCallister invited commissioners and the public to the Anderson Crossroads Harvest Festival at the old Anderson School on Saturday, October 17, from noon to 4:00 p.m. Planned activities included sack races, pie-eating and pumpkin-chucking contests, a petting zoo, hay rides, pumpkins for sale, food vendors, and live music. She encouraged the board to support the event and the community's efforts to make the old school area a destination.
Courthouse Fall Display

Mrs. McCallister requested permission for the 4-H groups to set up a fall display at the courthouse entrance, as they had in prior years. She said she would contact both groups.

Motion by Vice-Chairman Storey moved to approve the display. Seconded by Commissioner Osteen seconded. Board approved.

Chairman Hatch confirmed that Karen would handle contacting the groups.

KAREN VANAERNAM, DIXIE COUNTY ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

McGriff Pass

Karen VanAernam reported that the McGriff Pass navigational channel project Phase 1 is about 80% complete. The project, funded by a \$500,000 Florida Commerce award, involved engineering, permitting, geotechnical work, and bathymetric work. Karen said the work was initially expected to be complete by the end of September but was then projected for November 1. She said the county would continue following up because the channel was important to public safety and to the economic vitality of Suwannee, Dixie County, and the Tri-County area.

C2 Carbon

Mrs. VanAernam reported on C2 Carbon, formerly Circularity, which was leasing property beside Cross City Lumber in the industrial park. She said the company had spent about six months on site work, testing, and engineering. The company was developing a biochar product intended for industrial uses and was testing its product in the United Kingdom and Europe. Mrs. VanAernam said those tests and the development process were taking longer than the company had anticipated.

Chairman Hatch added that a recent discussion with the Damon Frecker, the company's chief technology officer had helped clarify how some of the material would be used in metal production. The representative was expected to join the board by Zoom on November 5 to provide an update and discuss the timing of bringing operations to the county. Mark described the project as a potential investment exceeding \$100 million and said the expected employment impact was approximately 40 jobs. He cautioned that the project would not solve all challenges facing the timber industry but could provide meaningful relief.

Mrs. VanAernam said the company viewed the Dixie County site as its flagship facility and wanted to become involved in the community, not simply employ people there. She said the county had purchased approximately 50–52 acres at the industrial park, with about 25 acres leased to the company, and that the remaining property could be available for another tenant.

In response to Bert Buzbee's question about the location, Chairman Hatch said the site was near the airport and jail access road.

Economic Development Partnership and Welcome Sign

Mrs. VanAernam invited commissioners to the North Florida Economic Development Partnership meeting at Camp Anderson the next day. She corrected the schedule during the discussion: registration would begin at 8:30 a.m., the meeting would run 9:00 a.m.–noon, and lunch would follow. She said the partnership included 15 counties and worked with Tallahassee,

Florida Commerce, and other entities. The agenda was expected to include discussion of property and a proposed property-tax amendment.

Mrs. VanAernam also reported that the Restore and Renew team had completed a welcome sign and landscaping in Jena. She thanked Sarah Ross, her family, and Paul Greenwell for donating and planting palm trees and completing landscaping work. She said the team hoped to develop similar welcome signs in other county communities.

Mrs. VanAernam requested permission for the 4-H groups to set up a fall display at the courthouse entrance, as they had in prior years. She said she would contact both groups.

Motion by Vice-Chairman Storey moved to approve the display. Seconded by Commissioner Osteen seconded. Board approved.

Chairman Hatch confirmed that Karen would handle contacting the groups.

SCOTT NIOLET, SAVINACIOUS

Mr. Niolet reported that the state was processing payments again and that approximately **\$152,000** was being processed that morning. He said the county and its partners were working to assemble funding for the Main Street interlocking seawall and riprap project.

Chairman Hatch thanked Mr. Niolet's team for its work and asked for a presentation with supporting visuals at a future meeting. Mr. Niolet said he expected to be ready to present after one or two more meetings.

GREG BAILEY, NORTH FLORIDA PROFESSIONAL SERVICES

Kellan Bailey reported that Fire Station 3 had passed final inspection and was complete, with contract closeout still underway. At Station 6, most exterior work had been completed; grading and interior work continued. Completion was tentatively expected near the end of the month, although Kellan had not received a confirmed substantial-completion date. He said the project was also waiting for power to be turned on.

Kellan said grouting at the sheriff's evidence building had been completed. After a meeting with the sheriff and staff, the county intended to bid the project before the end of the year.

Motion by Vice-Chairman Storey to approve bidding the evidence-building project. Seconded by Commissioner Osteen. Board approved.

During a request from the public for fire-station numbers to be identified by location, the following locations were stated:

- Station 1: Cross City, attached to the EOC
- Station 2: Old Town, near the helipad behind Hardee's
- Station 3: First District
- Station 4: Chavous Road
- Station 5: Jena
- Station 6: Horseshoe Beach
- Station 7: Suwannee

Horseshoe Beach Working Waterfront and Fire-Station Water Line

Greg Bailey said he had met with the Florida Department of Environmental Protection deputy secretary about the Horseshoe Beach working-waterfront project. He said staff had raised concerns about the limited space available, but the meeting had been productive. The county had provided additional information and was awaiting a response about a possible path forward. He also warned that state payment-system changes could delay reimbursements for several months.

Asked about the Horseshoe Beach fire-station water line, the representative said the town had a separate engineer reviewing the project. JD Nobles said the design was complete but had to be reviewed by the new engineering group; state funds were expected to become available around November. Kellan said the latest information was that a preliminary engineering report was due in November, although extensions had been discussed because grant agreements were issued late.

- Chairman Hatch asked Kellan to investigate the status and provide a fuller update at the next board meeting. Kellan agreed.

A representative also reported that grading work on the Horseshoe Beach project was approximately 50% complete.

JOHN LOCKLEAR, LOCKLEAR AND ASSOCIATES

Bobby Crosby spoke on behalf of John Locklear stating that the dredging on the Horseshoe Beach project was approximately 50% complete.

CINDY BELLOT, LIBRARY DIRECTOR

Ms. Bellot announced that someone would be at the library Tuesday through Friday to help residents with Medicare, noting that there had been many changes. She also reported that the Thursday morning reading program was continuing and expected to grow.

RAELYNN OSTEEN, SUWANNEE WATER AND SEWER

Not present.

STEVE FREMEN, CODE ENFORCEMENT & VETERANS SERVICE OFFICER

Nothing to present at this time.

MIKEL GAINNEY, COUNTY ROAD SUPERINTENDENT

Chairman Hatch thanked the road crew for working six days a week to catch up on roads after dry and wet weather had delayed work. He also relayed a resident's concern that garbage and debris remained along the Old Town School county road after mowing. Mr. Gainney said the crew had addressed, or would address, the cleanup. The Chairman clarified for the record that the discussion referred to the county road by the old school, not the school property.

Chairman Hatch asked about the amount of graded road in the county. Mr. Gainney referred to a prior review of the road network that had 750 miles and said the county had a substantial amount of road to maintain. Mr. Gainney also said rock crushing might begin within one or two weeks.

TIM JOHNSON, SOLID WASTE DIRECTOR

Rock Pit Compactor

Tim Johnson reported that power had been turned on at the Rock Pit compactor the previous day and that the equipment had worked well. He said staff would need to direct residents to the site because people were not yet accustomed to using it.

Solid Waste, Internal Charges, and County Costs

Mr. Johnson described a visit with Vice-Chairman Storey and John Jenkins to the Gilchrist County solid-waste operation. He said he had asked whether departments could dump waste and be billed later. The response, as Mr. Johnson relayed it, was that Gilchrist County did not operate that way: county departments, including the sheriff's department, clerk, county manager, and board, paid their share of solid-waste costs.

Mr. Johnson argued that county departments should pay for the services they use rather than having those costs subsidized by other funds or ratepayers. He gave the example of expecting to pay for a permit when his department needs one and expecting other departments to pay solid-waste charges when his department handles their waste. He said he wanted his department to be as self-sufficient as possible.

Chairman Hatch agreed with the principle and said county operations needed to adapt to budget conditions. He asked Bobby Crosby, a former county manager, to help Mr. Johnson understand how Gilchrist County had handled internal charges. Mr. Crosby said departments had been billed internally, including for waste handled by maintenance crews, so costs were budgeted to the departments that incurred them. He said he would be willing to sit down with Mr. Johnson to work through the process.

During the discussion, a participant noted that the county paid Waste Pro approximately \$18 per month for each of several county locations and county cans. Mr. Johnson said he would follow up with Bobby Crosby.

Mr. Johnson also asked about taking Columbus Day off. Chairman Hatch said Mr. Johnson could manage day-to-day operations as he saw fit, and Vice-Chairman Storey said the board should let him run his department. Later, John Jenkins stated that county offices would be closed on October 12 for Columbus Day.

LEON WRIGHT, BUILDING AND ZONING OFFICIAL

Department Permit Fees and Fee Review

Leon Wright asked whether his department should begin charging other county departments for permit fees, which had historically been waived. Chairman Hatch and commissioners agreed that permit fees should be charged beginning immediately.

Chairman also asked Mr. Wright to review the permit fee structure to ensure it covered staff time. As an example, Chairman Hatch said the county's fee for a driver's-license service was \$6.50, while the service took about 30 minutes; he noted that the state minimum wage had reached \$15 per hour. Leon said that zoning matters could also involve substantial staff and legal costs. He cited a campground application charged a \$300 fee that had led to significant work and an appeal.

Attorney Watson noted that legal and public-notice costs could add to the expense. Mr. Wright said the county had previously considered using a third-party planning service and would bring fee issues back to the board.

Solid-Waste Collections and Unpaid Accounts

Later in the meeting, Chairman Hatch asked whether the county's plan to assign someone in the solid-waste office to handle tickets and billing remained in place. Brenda Royal said the position was included in the budget proposal and was intended to move billing and collection closer to the point of service, reducing unpaid bills and bad checks.

Mr. Johnson said he and Ms. Royal had discussed a transition around November 1, but that he could begin sooner. Ms. Royal said finance would work with the department to change how bills were posted. Chairman Hatch asked that the transition start as soon as practical.

The board discussed unpaid accounts and bad checks. Mr. Johnson said he understood the process to involve sending a formal letter and, if the debt remained unpaid after 30 days, referring it to the state attorney. Attorney Watson said she and Mr. Johnson had discussed the need for written policies giving the department clear and consistent authority to address nonpayment. She noted that without an established policy, enforcement could be seen as inconsistent or personal. Participants also mentioned an unpaid business account and a

demand letter that had been sent. Chairman Hatch said customers needed to pay their bills, while cautioning that the county should treat people fairly.

Planning, Flood Maps, and County Facilities LPA Vacancies and Watershed Flood Maps

Mr. Wright reported that several LPA members had resigned but were willing to remain until replacements were found. He apologized for the frustration created by asking the volunteer LPA board to handle the data-center proposal and said a consulting group might have been better suited to that work. He asked commissioners to consider names for replacements.

Mr. Wright also reported that the Suwannee River Water Management District and its consultants were updating watershed information that could lead to changes in flood maps. Some properties could be added to mapped flood areas, while others could be removed. He said the review applied to the Suwannee River watershed, not the entire county. The county planned to share an online map link and prepare public information.

Mr. Wright said property owners should submit written comments during the limited comment period, expected to end in late November. A representative emphasized that this was the opportunity to raise concerns before later changes could become more costly.

Mr. Wright said he would review the GIS layers and identify known problem areas, noting that the last broad map update had been in 2017. Chairman Hatch asked that the Stormwater Task Force also be kept informed.

Building Department Parking

Chairman Hatch asked whether a shed near the building department should be removed to provide customer and employee parking. Mr. Wright said he had spoken with Chief Brown about it and had a parking layout in mind. If the county could not remove the shed, Leon said he could contact a contractor who handled that type of building. Chairman Hatch asked Mr. Wright and Chief Brown to coordinate and resolve the issue promptly.

County Insurance and Policy Manuals

Roy Bass said new policy manuals would be distributed to department employees for acknowledgment and notarization. He said he would send an email that afternoon and arrange for staff to come through his office, taking different shifts into account. Distribution was to begin Tuesday at 9:00 a.m.

Mr. Bass also reported that vehicle insurance cards had arrived and that the county was reviewing its vehicle schedule. Michael Richter, of Boyd Insurance, said the review had identified discrepancies between actively tagged vehicles and the insurance schedule. John Jenkins had obtained a list of county-owned vehicle tags, and the county and insurer were working through it to remove vehicles that should no longer be insured and identify potential savings.

SCOTTY PENDARVIS, CHIEF INFORMATION OFFICER

Nothing to present at this time.

DARIAN BROWN, DIRECTOR OF EMERGENCY SERVICES

Nothing to present at this time.

GAIL CARTER, INDIGENT CARE

Not present.

JESSICA COOPER, COUNTY EXTENSION AGENT

Was present with the 4H Students earlier in the meeting and left with the students after their presentation and Proclamation Reading.

ANGIE CROWLEY, HUMAN RESOURCES ADMINISTRATOR

Not present.

JOHN JENKINS, COUNTY MANAGER- SEE REPORT

1. Request Board approval to execute the Catastrophic Inmate Medical Insurance FY 2026-2027 in the amount of \$91,669.20.

Motion by Commissioner Osteen to execute the Catastrophic Inmate Medical Insurance FY 2026-2027 in the amount of \$91,669.20. Seconded by Vice-Chairman Storey. Board approved.

2. Request Board approval of the SHIP Release of Lien for Lori Fowler.

Motion by Vice-Chairman Storey of the SHIP Release of Lien for Lori Fowler. Seconded by Commissioner Osteen. Board approved.

3. Request Board approval of the lowest bid from Advanced Data Solutions for the CPTAG digitization of records for the County Manager office in the amount of \$10,500.00 pending the approved/signed grant agreement.

Motion by Commissioner Osteen for approval of the lowest bid from Advanced Data Solutions for the CPTAG digitization of records for the County Manager office in the amount of \$10,500.00 pending the approved/signed grant agreement. Seconded by Vice-Chairman Storey. Board approved.

4. Request Board approval of the DCHD (Dixie County Health Department) Contract FY 2026-2027 and the updated fee schedule.

Motion by Commissioner Osteen for approval of the DCHD (Dixie County Health Department) Contract FY 2026-2027 and the updated fee schedule. Seconded by Vice-Chairman Storey. Board approved.

5. Request Board approval to accept the lowest quote for a 40x120x14 open pole barn from Freedom Mfg. & Roofing for SWTF equipment storage in the amount of \$21,619.80 using LATCF grant funds based on SWTF recommendations.

Motion by Vice-Chairman Storey for approval to accept the lowest quote for a 40x120x14 open pole barn from Freedom Mfg. & Roofing for SWTF equipment storage in the amount of \$21,619.80 using LATCF grant funds based on SWTF recommendations. Seconded by Commissioner Osteen. Board approved.

6. Request Board approval to accept the lowest quote for safety cones and signage from Safety Zone Specialists to be used for SWTF MOT (maintenance of traffic) in the amount of \$2,435.30 using LATCF grant funds based on SWTF recommendation.

Motion by Commissioner Osteen to accept the lowest quote for safety cones and signage from Safety Zone Specialists to be used for SWTF MOT (maintenance of traffic) in the amount of \$2,435.30 using LATCF grant funds based on SWTF recommendation. Seconded by Vice-Chairman Storey. Board approved.

7. Request Board approval for donation from the BOCC personal account of \$500.00 the Defenders of Dixie Fishing Tournament.

Motion by Commissioner Osteen for approval of a donation from the BOCC personal account of \$500.00 the Defenders of Dixie Fishing Tournament. Seconded by Vice-Chairman Storey. Board approved.

Airport-Area Property Lease

Mr. Jenkins told the board that Jim and Matt Edmonds had asked to lease county property near the airport for a fabrication and powder-coating operation. The proposal was for a 10-year lease, with the first two years rent-free while the lessees cleared and prepared the land and installed infrastructure, followed by rent of \$3,000 per year for the next eight years. The discussion also referred to a further 10-year option.

Chairman Hatch said he had been working on the proposal for several years and was pleased that the business had grown to approximately 12 employees. He explained that the proposed property was near the airport and included a canal that divided the land, making it a challenging parcel to develop. Commissioners discussed including annual rent increases, airport-related restrictions, a requirement to begin development within a specified period, and provisions against activities such as burning that could affect the airport.

Motion by Vice-Chairman Storey to approve the lease arrangement. Seconded by Commissioner Osteen seconded. Board approved.

Follow-up: Attorney Watson was asked to prepare the lease documents and include the discussed terms and standard language.

Information Items:

1. Reminder of Dixie County hosting the NFEDP meeting on Friday, Oct 2, 2026, at Camp Anderson Anchored 8:00 am – 2:00 pm.
2. Reminder Monday, Oct 12, 2026, County Offices would be closed.

CHANA WATSON, COUNTY ATTORNEY

Proposed Emergency Burn-Ban Ordinance

Attorney Watson reported that the proposed emergency burn-ban ordinance was ready to proceed through the ordinance process. It would allow the County Manager to activate or deactivate a burn ban under specified conditions, using criteria tied to the Florida Forest Service and setting out enforcement and penalties. Attorney Watson said the first reading was that day and the final reading was scheduled for the following Thursday. **No vote was requested at this meeting.**

Chairman Hatch emphasized that all commissioners should be notified when a burn ban was activated or deactivated. Chana said the proposed ordinance required prompt notification to the board, fire chief or designee, the public, and the Florida Forest Service. She offered to resend the full ordinance for commissioners to review.

Surplus Mack Truck

Attorney Watson presented resolution Res. 2026-48 declaring a 2019 Mack truck with a Heil packer body surplus property so it could be sold by sealed bid. She said the county had previously agreed to sell the truck and needed to formally remove it from county inventory and insurance records. Bids were expected by October 8.

Motion by Vice-Chairman Storey moved to approve the resolution. Seconded by Commissioner Osteen. The motion carried.

Voluntary Salary Donations

Attorney Watson presented a resolution (Res. 2026-49) establishing a procedure for commissioners to voluntarily donate all or part of their salaries back to the county. She explained that salaries were set by statute and could not simply be changed; the resolution would document voluntary donations and provide a process for finance to account for them.

Finance Director Brenda Royal asked how payroll would be processed, including whether checks should be issued and returned. Attorney Watson said a commissioner could either receive and return a check or choose not to receive one, but payroll and tax withholding still needed to be recorded correctly.

Chairman Hatch said he did not want a check issued and returned if the donation could be handled directly. He asked whether a donation could be directed to his retirement through FRS. Attorney Watson said the county would need to work with its accounting system provider to confirm what the system could implement and how deductions and taxes would be handled.

Motion by Vice-Chairman Storey moved to approve the resolution. Seconded by Commissioner Osteen. The motion carried.

BARBIE HIGGINBOTHAM, CLERK OF COURT

Mrs. Higginbotham thanked Brenda and the finance staff. They have worked long and hard and diligently to accomplish everything they've done the last couple days, and she'll fill you in on the rest. Mrs. Higginbotham wanted to publicly thank Ms. Royal.

BRENDA ROYAL, CHIEF FINANCIAL OFFICER

Brenda Royal reported that the county audit was ongoing and that finance was working with the auditors while also transitioning to a new finance system. She thanked her staff for closing one fiscal year and opening the next and said payroll had been processed successfully.

Ms. Royal proposed providing the public with accessible explanations of county funds, revenues, and how funds could be spent. She noted that county funds were handled through deposits and checks, that cash use had been reduced, and that parks were now using online payments. She said she hoped public information could explain the checks and balances used by the finance office.

Chairman Hatch supported explaining county finances but said the information needed to be concise enough that people would read it. He suggested covering one department or fund at a time.

Joey Lander offered to help publish a regular county-transparency column and to share links to detailed material through the newspaper, website, and social media.

Tim Johnson said he supported transparency and wanted people to understand how money was handled. Chairman Hatch described the accusations of theft directed at county officials as disheartening and said he believed commissioners and staff were trying to act in the county's best interests.

During the discussion, Jim Ward, of Branford, asked whether the *Advocate* newspaper was still distributed in Suwannee. Joey said the paper had not been distributed there since a store closed, but that distribution could be arranged at the arena, restaurant, and hardware store.

Chairman Hatch also thanked Brenda and the finance staff for their work during a demanding period, including resolving payroll concerns and keeping the county's financial operations moving.

COUNTY COMMISSION ITEMS

Vice-Chairman Storey said the meeting had been productive and invited attendees to return for the 1:00 p.m. workshop. He said he would provide an update on a recent city and county meeting.

Commissioner Osteen thanked departments for seeking cost savings. He also reported that the dock at Butler Douglas Park was expected to be installed the following day, based on updates provided to Roy Bass.

Chairman Hatch thanked departments and staff for adapting to changes.

Solid-Waste Operations, Roll-Off Sites, and Closing Comments

Chairman Hatch asked Tim Johnson to return to the podium and asked whether the budget still included assigning someone in the solid-waste office to handle tickets, billing, and related work. Brenda Royal confirmed that the position remained in the budget proposal. She explained that the goal was to improve collection at the time of service and reduce outstanding bills and bad checks. Chairman Hatch said he wanted the transition to proceed as soon as practical.

Chairman Hatch then proposed placing millings at the county roll-off sites. He said the improvements could reduce potholes, grading work, and lime-rock use, and make the sites cleaner. He noted that millings had been used successfully in Suwannee.

Motion by Commissioner Osteen to place millings at the county roll-off sites. Seconded by Vice-Chairman Storey seconded. Board approved.

Vice-Chairman Storey raised the issue of unpaid accounts. Tim Johnson said he would review the existing policy and described the process he understood for a bad check: send a formal notice, allow 30 days for a response, and then refer the matter to the state attorney if it remained unresolved. Commissioners discussed whether customers with unpaid balances should continue receiving service.

Attorney Watson said she and Mr. Johnson had discussed creating written rules and policies so the department could address nonpayment consistently. She noted that without a clear policy, enforcement could be perceived as singling someone out. Chana also reported that a demand letter had been sent regarding an unpaid account and said she would update the board as the matter progressed.

Chairman Hatch asked when the billing and collection work could move to the solid-waste office. Tim said he and the employee had discussed November 1, but that the change could happen sooner. Brenda said finance would work with the department to adjust how bills were posted. JD Nobles said customers who owed money should pay before receiving further service. Mr. Johnson agreed, comparing the requirement to paying a utility bill to avoid service being shut off.

During the discussion, Clerk Higginbotham suggested that the county stop doing business with a company that owed money until it paid. Chairman Hatch said customers needed to pay their bills, while also observing that the county should treat people as it would want to be treated.

Closing Remarks Before Public Comment

Chairman Hatch asked for an update on Commissioner Stephenson. No substantive update was recorded; Mark asked that Jody be kept in the board's thoughts and prayers and expressed hope that he would return.

Chairman Hatch reminded attendees about the 1:00 p.m. workshop and the Camp Anderson meeting the following morning. He thanked Karen VanAernam for her work organizing the event and said he would represent the board there. He then opened the public-comment period.

PUBLIC COMMENTS AND CONCERNS

Public Comments and Fire/EMS Discussion County Operational Changes

In response to **Barbara Cummings**, who asked what major county changes were being made, Chairman Hatch described several measures. These included parking county vehicles and reviewing whether particular vehicles should be returned to employees whose duties required them; reviewing fuel and other purchases; changing roll-off-site hours and solid-waste operations; and making changes in the road and building departments.

Chairman Hatch said changes needed to consider both cost savings and operational efficiency—for example, whether taking a vehicle away from an employee could interfere with getting equipment or fuel to a job site.

Chairman Hatch said John Jenkins had been reviewing invoices and identified purchases such as mixed fuel, ice, and energy drinks that should not have been charged to the county. He said the county was trying to balance lower costs with the services residents needed.

Fire and EMS Staffing and Response

Chairman Hatch discussed public criticism of fire and EMS responses and said dispatchers and responders often had limited information when a call came in. He described how a reported vehicle fire could turn out to be a less serious issue, while other calls could involve urgent rescue needs. He said responders assessed the situation once on scene.

Leon Wright described an incident at the building department in which a man had cut off his thumb. A fire truck arrived and began treating him, while the ambulance was delayed because the local ambulance was out of the county. Leon said the incident made him appreciate the medical work fire crews could provide while waiting for an ambulance.

Chief Brown gave a detailed explanation of the department's staffing and response challenges. He said the county had gone from approximately 65 volunteers 15–20 years earlier to six, and that fire engines were often responding to medical calls as well as fires. He said the department had cut three positions that year and lost an ambulance and staffing capacity. He reported that ambulances regularly transported patients to Gainesville, approximately 53 miles each way, and that the county could have multiple calls holding when there were no local units available.

Chief Brown explained that dispatch information might not reveal how serious an emergency was and that fire engines sometimes carried personnel and equipment needed to assist with medical calls, rescues, and fires. He described the limits of staffing one person per engine, the need for additional engines and water at fires, and the expense of rescue equipment.

He said the department had already reduced expenses—including subscriptions, water machines, and uniform allowances—and that further significant cuts would likely require reducing staff, equipment, or stations. He said he planned to leave the department, with his last day expected to be March 12, 2027, and that staff would continue handling department operations.

Chairman Hatch thanked Chief Brown and the department. He said the pressures facing rural emergency services were not unique to Dixie County and emphasized that the board appreciated the work being done.

Additional Public Comments

Bobby Davis said he appreciated the work of emergency services and understood that emergency responders did not always have the full situation when dispatched. He said counties were facing difficult choices and encouraged residents to help where they could.

Bert Buzbee praised the solid-waste operation and its staff, saying the goal had been to keep sites clean so residents did not have to walk through garbage to dispose of theirs. He said he understood the operational changes affecting the sites and urged the public to offer solutions as well as identify problems. He also thanked county staff and Mrs. Higginbotham for their work. He praised the responsiveness of commissioners Chairman Hatch, David Osteen, and Daniel Wood, based on personal experience contacting them.

A caller was invited to speak by phone, but no comment was recorded.

ADJOURN

Motion to Adjourn made by Vice Chairman Storey. Seconded by Commissioner Osteen. Board approved.

PLEASE BE ADVISED that if a person decides to appeal any decision made by the Board with respect to any matter considered at such meeting or hearings, he/ she will need a record of the proceedings, and for such purpose, he/ she will need to ensure that a verbatim record of the proceedings is made, which record includes the testimony and evidence upon which the appeal is to be based.

“Persons with disabilities requesting reasonable accommodations to participate in this proceeding should contact (352) 486-4931 (Voice & TDD) or via Florida Relay Service at (800) 955-8771.” The Board meets the first Thursday of each month at 10:00 AM and the third Thursday of each month at 6:00 PM. Individuals that would like to be placed on the agenda should call Barbie Higginbotham, Clerk of Court, by 4:00 PM on the Friday Preceding the Board meeting, at (352) 498-1200.