

**MINUTES OF THE
SOUTHWEST FLORIDA REGIONAL PLANNING COUNCIL
JANUARY 16, 2025, MEETING**

The virtual zoom meeting of the Southwest Florida Regional Planning Council's Executive Board was held on January 16, 2025. Collier County Commissioner and Council Chair, Mr. Bill McDaniel called the meeting to order at 10:00 a.m. There was a quorum of the Executive Committee present.

BOARD MEMBERS PRESENT

Charlotte County: Mr. Don McCormick (zoom)

Collier County: Commissioner Bill McDaniel

Glades County: Commissioner Tim Stanley

Hendry County: None

Lee County: Councilman Fred Burson – City of Fort Myers

Sarasota County: Councilman Ron Smith – City of Venice

Ex-Officio Members: None

OTHERS PRESENT

Derek Felder – President of the Unite Lehigh, Inc.
Tom Lanahan – Executive Director, TCRPC
Ms. Margaret Wuerstle - Executive Director, SWFRPC
Ms. Rebekah Harp – Deputy Director/Business Operations Manager, SWFRPC
Ms. Catherine Peralta – SWFRPC Vista
Ms. Asmaa Odeh – Project Director, SWFRPC (zoom)
Mr. Jim Burch - Disaster Recovery Coordinator/Project Manager, SWFRPC

Commissioner Bill McDaniel offered a motion to allow online members to participate and vote. Councilman Ron Smith seconded the motion to allow online members to participate and vote. The motion was approved unanimously.

PUBLIC COMMENT

Mr. Derek Felder introduced himself as the President of Unite Lehigh, Inc. He explained that they are working toward incorporating Lehigh Acres, which requires the completion of a feasibility study. He inquired if this is something the RPC could assist with. Additionally, the Southwest Florida Business Alliance is working on an Urban 3 study that analyzes revenue streams for various areas within Lee County, as well as land zoning information for Lee County.

Commissioner McDaniel stated that he would like to ensure Mr. Felder has his contact information. He mentioned that Collier County has gathered some relevant data and offered to share whatever information they have. Collier County has engaged a company called Metro Forecasting Models to develop a tool known as the Collier Interactive Growth Model (CIGN).

Commissioner McDaniel described CIGN as an impressive planning tool that uses data-driven population estimates to assist staff in making zoning and growth decisions. He emphasized the importance of accurate population estimates, explaining that plans based on incorrect data—whether for wildlife populations or human populations—are bound to fail. He noted that the growth model evaluates factors such as infrastructure, services, employment, entertainment, and traffic impacts to ensure sustainable planning across the county. He recommended reaching out to David Farmer for more information about the growth model and promised to share his contact details. Commissioner McDaniel thanked Mr. Felder for attending the meeting and encouraged him to submit a formal request outlining how the council could assist with his efforts. He assured Mr. Felder that the council would place the request on the agenda for further discussion to determine how they might support his initiative.

AGENDA

AGENDA ITEM #6(a)

MINUTES: None

Commissioner McDaniel asked, "Why don't we have any minutes?"

Ms. Wuerstle explained, "Because they were quite lengthy, we want to ensure they are done correctly. With the holidays and everything else happening, we weren't able to complete them in time. However, they will be included in the next agenda."

AGENDA ITEM #7(a)
FINANCIALS: November Financials

Ms. Wuerstle explained that the financials were typical for this time of year. Currently, there is an unaudited negative net income of approximately \$32,000, but as reimbursements from grants are collected, those numbers will fluctuate throughout the year. Since November is only the second month of the first quarter, everything is on track. She added, "This is very typical for this time of year. She asked Rebekah if there was anything she missed or need to address. Rebekah confirmed there was nothing further to note. Ms. Wuerstle emphasized that nothing alarming stood out, and while there is a deficit, it is normal for this point in the fiscal year. She also mentioned there is still some additional income expected to come in.

Commissioner McDaniel asked if the organization is still on track for the projected 16 to 18-month lifespan, considering the burn rate of current expenditures compared to revenues. He noted that there were fluctuations last year and inquired if the timeline remains accurate.

Ms. Wuerstle confirmed that we are still on track to make it through this fiscal year.

Commissioner McDaniel then asked when the fiscal year begins and ends.

Ms. Wuerstle explained that the fiscal year begins on October 1st and ends on September 30th. We're on track to get through this year. However, the city of Fort Myers has notified us that they will no longer pay their dues, which is a setback. Fortunately, we received an unexpected grant from DEP that will not only offset this loss but also provide a bit of additional funding.

Commissioner McDaniel explained, "So we're still on track financially to make it through to the end of the fiscal year in September, which aligns with what we've discussed previously. I've also been making progress in my communications with our colleagues. I've scheduled meetings for next week, February, and beyond, as we continue to work on the reorganizational aspects of our efforts."

Ms. Wuerstle asked if there was anything she could provide, such as the PowerPoint presentation used for Venice and other communities, and whether that would be helpful.

Commissioner McDaniel responded, "When I'm ready, yes. I'll review what you have and tailor it to fit what I'm looking to present. I'll reach out when the time comes. For now, I've been distributing the draft MOU, draft bylaws, and other documents that have already been accepted by Collier County and the City of Naples. I'm sharing those with the commissioners to keep things moving forward."

Councilman Smith requested clarification regarding page 24 of the Government Fund Activity, noting that it lists all years except for 2024. He asked if the information had been cut off.

Ms. Harp explained that the report comes from the accountant who conducts the annual audit. She clarified that 2024 is not included yet, but once the current audit is completed, it will be added.

Ms. Wuerstle inquired about the audit's timeline, asking when it was scheduled.

Ms. Harp replied that the process has already started, with the auditor requesting preliminary information.

Councilman Smith recalled that at the last meeting, they had discussed some unofficial numbers for 2024 but noted that final figures should not be included until they are audited and approved. Ms. Harp confirmed that only figures that are audited are included.

Commissioner Bill McDaniel offered a motion to accept the November Financials. Councilman Ron Smith seconded the motion to accept the November Financials. The motion was approved unanimously.

AGENDA ITEM #7(b)

FINANCIALS:

Draft Comparison of Assessments (Current vs. Proposed) (*Informational*)

Ms. Wuerstle explained that the draft comparison of assessments item is informational. It was requested to be included on the agenda each month.

Commissioner McDaniel clarified that the designation of assets outlined is essentially the per capita fee and the proposed assessments, which represent the revenue streams we'll be relying on if the counties participate. The only adjustment he suggested would be to reflect how this new organization will operate. It will include only the six counties: Sarasota, Lee, Hendry, Glades, Collier, and Charlotte. These counties will be the primary responsible entities. Then it could be refined further to focus solely on those six counties, then designate the individual cities within them. Eventually, municipalities within these counties can opt to participate and pay their fees if they choose. But our primary revenue sources will strictly be the counties."

Ms. Wuerstle responded that we will structure the chart by counties first and then list the cities or municipalities that choose to participate underneath.

Councilman Fred Burson arrived, and Commissioner McDaniel mentioned that the issue was brought up that the City of Fort Myers had decided to discontinue their contribution. Councilman Burson explained that after the city conducted an investigation, they discovered they were one of the only cities making payments. As a result, the council voted to suspend their contributions. He noted that, despite informing his council of his role as Vice Chair, they still chose to suspend the payments.

Commissioner McDaniel reiterated his main objective, emphasizing that the organization must include membership from the six counties. He noted that the draft bylaws were structured to allow a municipality from each county to join the new organization. As regular meetings resume and the organization demonstrates its value, municipalities will have the option to join. If a municipality opts in, their contribution would offset the county's proportional share. For example, under the new MOU, if Lee County's contribution is \$105,000 and Fort Myers contributes \$15,000, Lee County's share would be reduced by that amount. Additionally, payments have been divided into quarterly installments to streamline accounting.

Commissioner McDaniel stated that the goal is to persevere until a governing board is established and all counties are committed to supporting the RPC. "We'll continue to do our best in the meantime," he added. He noted that before Councilman Burson arrived, Ms. Wuerstle confirmed that, based on current revenue and expense estimates, the organization is financially able to operate through September of this year, potentially longer depending on circumstances. Commissioner McDaniel emphasized his plan to wrap up meetings with all the counties in the first quarter. He is actively working to schedule these discussions with county boards to encourage their return to the organization. "If I'm successful, that's great. If not, we'll move to Plan B," he concluded.

AGENDA ITEM #7(c)
FINANCIALS:
Government Fund History (*Informational*)

Ms. Wuerstle explained that the government fund history item is informational and that this is the one that was requested to be included on the agenda each month.

AGENDA ITEM #8(a)
CONSENT AGENDA: Appointment to the
Coastal & Heartland National Estuary Partnership (CHNEP)

Commissioner McDaniel asked what is the CHNEP?

Ms. Wuerstle explained that it stands for the Coastal & Heartland National Estuary Partnership. She noted that the organization had previously been called the Charlotte Harbor National Estuary Program but underwent a name change.

Ms. Wuerstle continued to explain that Don McCormick has represented the board on our behalf for many years but has requested that someone else be appointed to take his place.

Councilman Burson stated that he currently serves on the board as a representative of the City of Fort Myers. Ms. Wuerstle then asked if it would be possible for him to represent both the city and the RPC.

Councilman Burson responded that he doesn't mind, but it may be best to appoint a different representative. He continued to explain that the CHNEP expanded its boundaries, now extending all the way from Kissimmee to the Caloosahatchee Estuary and down south.

Commissioner McDaniel accepted Don McCormick's resignation from the CHNEP and mentioned that the search for a new appointee would continue in the meantime. He asked if Councilman Burson would be willing to represent the RPC until a replacement is found. Councilman Burson responded that he would be happy to represent both.

Don McCormick mentioned that there is a meeting this Thursday at the North County Regional Center in Charlotte County, just off of 41 and he will send the details and thanked Fred for stepping up.

Councilman Ron Smith offered a motion to approve the consent agenda. Commissioner Bill McDaniel seconded the motion to approve the consent agenda. The motion was approved unanimously.

AGENDA ITEM #9 DIRECTORS REPORT

Margaret requested that item 9c is moved up for a presentation.

AGENDA ITEM #9(c) Resolution #24-01 US 27 Rail

Treasure Coast Regional Planning Council's Executive Director, Tom Lanahan explained that This resolution urges FDOT to advance the planning of an alternative freight rail corridor through the central part of the state, connecting the Port of Miami or western Miami area to the Orlando region. Currently, port traffic from Port Miami, Port Everglades, and the Port of Palm Beach moves along a constrained corridor on the East Coast. This proposed route would provide an alternative by redirecting long freight trains away from downtown areas along the coast and instead routing them through the central state.

The corridor would extend from the west side of Miami along US 27 to the southern part of Lake Okeechobee, linking with the South Central Florida Express, also known as the Sugar Railroad. From there, it could follow two potential paths—one along the east side of the lake, reconnecting with the Florida East Coast Railway, and the other along the west side, linking with the CSX line in Sebring.

Of particular relevance to this area, the route would pass through the Airglades Intermodal Logistics Center in the southwest corner of Lake Okeechobee, opening opportunities for new rail customers and enhancing freight handling capabilities at Airglades. This project would also strengthen the state's transportation resiliency, as all major freight routes in the southeast—

including I-95, the Turnpike, FEC Railway, and CSX Railway—currently operate within a narrow coastal corridor.

This resolution calls on FDOT to continue advancing this long-studied concept toward implementation, recognizing that the time is right to move forward.

Councilman Burson asked if the land for this proposed rail system had been acquired?

Mr. Lanahan responded that the proposed route is designed to primarily follow existing right-of-way, minimizing the need for land acquisition. It would run along U.S. 27 within FDOT-owned right-of-way and then transition into the South Central Florida Express corridor, utilizing its existing infrastructure.

The only areas requiring land acquisition would likely be on the western edge of Miami and in the Belle Glade area, south of town, where the route would connect to the Sugar Railroad. To avoid running directly through the center of Belle Glade, the plan is to route the rail around the outskirts. While some additional land may need to be acquired in certain areas, the majority of the corridor is already under public or railroad ownership.

The second question from Councilman Burson was about estimates for the condemnation requisites for those lands that aren't part of it yet?

Mr. Lanahan requested clarification regarding whether the question pertained to time or dollar, to which the chair clarified it was in terms of dollar.

Mr. Lanahan explained that from a cost perspective, the specifics would be determined by FDOT during the engineering phase, when they assess the exact amount of land that would need to be acquired. Therefore, at this stage, there are no definitive figures. Mr. Lanahan further explained that he believed the initial planning study included an estimated dollar figure for right-of-way acquisition, but he is unsure of the specific breakdown of that amount.

Commissioner McDaniel requested a map of the designed route and what needs to be acquired.

Mr. Lanahan explained that the plan involves following US-27 from the west side of Miami to Belle Glade on the southern side of the lake, which is the only section that aligns with US-27. From there, the route shifts to an existing railroad right-of-way, circling the west side of the lake before heading inland. He acknowledged the concern, recognizing the portion of US-27 in the region and the presence of driveways and businesses. However, he clarified that the segment in question primarily runs through remote areas in the far western parts of Miami-Dade, Broward, and Palm Beach counties, making its impact on local properties less significant than it may seem.

Councilman Smith asked if this is the route that was once envisioned for the bullet train that was put into the Constitution and taken out of the Constitution?

Mr. Lanahan replied that he didn't believe so, thinking it was an East-West route, and asked whether it was also going to Miami.

Mr. Smith responded, recalling that it was from Orlando to Tampa.

Mr. Lanahan confirmed that it would follow the I-4 right-of-way, noting that as Brightline extends to Tampa, discussions have centered around utilizing that same corridor.

Commissioner Bill McDaniel offered a motion to approve the Resolution #24-01 US 27 Rail. Councilman Fred Burson seconded the motion to approve the Resolution #24-01 US 27 Rail. The motion was approved unanimously.

Don McCormick mentioned that Jim Burch from Cape Coral had briefly posted a question regarding hazardous materials and related concerns. He noted that addressing this topic at this stage of the discussion might be premature but wanted to acknowledge that the question was raised.

Commissioner McDaniel agreed with Don, stating that the question was premature. He emphasized that the priority should be determining whether the rail will be built or even considered before discussing what might be transported on it.

AGENDA ITEM #9(a)(b)
Executive Director's Evaluation
Executive Directors Compensation Matrix (Informational)

Ms. Wuerstle stated that the request to complete the director's evaluation form was sent out three times, but only five responses were received.

Commissioner McDaniel responded that Margaret's contract expired in February 2018. If she is comfortable continuing under the existing contract terms until the council is restructured, then they will proceed accordingly. He emphasized that major executive decisions should be postponed until a fully functioning council is in place, since there is a continuing struggle to gather enough members for an executive board quorum.

He also addressed Fred directly, expressing that he does not want him to leave the council simply because the city has decided to stop funding its participation.

Councilman Burson stated that he has all intent to continue attending.

Commissioner McDaniel responded that he was glad to hear that, emphasizing that as a member of the executive committee, his participation is essential for conducting formal business and meeting requirements. He added that the city's decision to stop paying does not change the importance of his involvement.

Councilman Burson stated that if the council's viability is restored and other members resume their paid participation, the city would reconsider its financial contribution.

Commissioner McDaniel responded that as it stands right now Collier County is in, and the City of Naples is in. There are a few that he is getting positive indications from Sarasota, Lee, and Hendry right now. So he is moving quickly, and he plans to meet with officials in Glades next week as well.

Commissioner McDaniel responded that if Margaret is fine with it, they will leave the matter as is until the group reconvenes. Ms. Wuerstle agreed, stating that she was okay with that.

AGENDA ITEM #9(d) **Hurricane Economic Recovery & Resiliency Project Work Sheet**

Ms. Wuerstle explained that the federal agencies, specifically the EDA, has requested all RPCs affected by Hurricanes Helene and Milton to schedule a listening session or workshop, similar to the one held for Hurricane Ian. Several federal agencies, including FEMA, EDA, USDA, and HUD, will be present to discuss available resources, the recently approved supplemental funding, and to engage in roundtable discussions about regional needs and potential projects for funding. They are particularly seeking large, transformative projects.

The meeting is scheduled for February 19th from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. at the Charlotte Harbor Event Center. The agenda has not yet been sent out, as it was just approved yesterday. The event is being co-sponsored with CHNEP, which helped secure the venue free of charge, providing significant cost savings.

Ms. Wuerstle continued to explain that Project Summary sheets are available in the meeting packet and on the table. Attendees are encouraged to fill out a sheet for each project they wish to propose. These will be reviewed and discussed, and while no final funding decisions will be made at the meeting, agencies will take note of priority projects. Areas of particular interest include flooding, infrastructure, resiliency, housing, and cultural and natural resources.

Commissioner McDaniel inquired whether this information had already been sent to the municipalities or RPC members. Ms. Wuerstle clarified that it had not yet been distributed, as the agenda was only approved the day before, but assured that it would be sent out to all of them. She emphasized the importance of having elected officials in attendance and encouraged everyone to urge their staff and officials to participate and advocate for their projects.

Ms. Wuerstle continued explaining that while the supplemental funding amounts to billions of dollars, not all of it will be allocated to Florida. Other states, including South Carolina, North Carolina, and areas affected by wildfires in California, will also receive portions of the funds. However, she stressed the importance of submitting local projects to ensure the region secures its fair share of the funding.

Commissioner McDaniel asked who was organizing the event.

Ms. Wuerstle replied that it was being coordinated by federal agencies in partnership with the Regional Planning Councils.

Commissioner McDaniel asked which federal agencies? Ms. Wuerstle responded FEMA, EDA, HUD, USDA.

Councilman Burson asked if the information should be sent to city management for them to complete. He added that while he didn't mind submitting it himself, it would be more beneficial for city management, who are already working with FEMA, to handle it as well.

Ms. Wuerstle responded that we will send it to all the elected officials in the counties and all the cities as they specifically stated they wanted it sent to all the elected officials.

Ms. Wuerstle reminded all members of the meeting details: February 19th, from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. at the Charlotte Harbor Event Center.

Ms. Wuerstle continued, stating that the information will be sent to city and county managers, economic development directors, and planning directors.

Commissioner McDaniel stressed the need to send the information out to county and city managers as soon as possible for further distribution. He acknowledged that many counties are already heavily involved with those organizations in submitting grant fund requests, so it might seem redundant. However, he assured that they would make sure the information reaches the managers.

Ms. Wuerstle explained that the meeting is scheduled and approved, with the agencies set to attend. She emphasized the importance of ensuring everyone is aware of the event and has copies of the project summary forms to take back with them so that they are not surprised or it gets lost in emails.

AGENDA ITEM #10 COMMITTEE REPORTS

AGENDA ITEM #10(a) EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

There was no update given.

AGENDA ITEM #11 NEW BUSINESS

Commissioner McDaniel said, "Speaking of reconvening as a group, I believe I saw my friend Wayne Gaither on the phone. I spoke with him yesterday, and I'm not sure if it was you, Margaret, or my assistant, Christina, who sent Wayne our 2025 meeting schedule. We've decided to move our meeting location to the DOT building. Wayne is fine with all the dates on the 2025 schedule except for one. He didn't specify which one, but he has a conflict with that date. Margaret, if you could please reach out to Wayne and coordinate the relocation of our meetings to the DOT building, and get that information sent out to all of our members as soon as possible. The building is located near I-75, so we'll make sure to get all the details together. We had discussed this before, and when I initially contacted the department, they hesitated because of the building's enhanced security. However, once they realized who I was working with, they agreed to cooperate. Wayne actually called me yesterday, thinking our meeting was today, but I had to correct him. We don't need to make a formal motion on this, but I would like our February 20th meeting to be held at the DOT building. Margaret, please quickly coordinate with Wayne to find out which meeting date in 2025 conflicts with the room availability. We also need to inform the South Florida Water Management District that we won't be using their facility anymore and that we'll be moving our meetings to the department building."

**AGENDA ITEM #12
STATE AGENCIES COMMENTS/REPORTS**


No State Agency's reports given.

**AGENDA ITEM #13
COUNCIL MEMBERS' COMMENTS**

No comments given.

**AGENDA ITEM #14
ADJOURN**

The meeting adjourned at 10:49 a.m.



Commissioner Bill McDaniel, Chair

The meeting was duly advertised in the January 3, 2025, issue of the FLORIDA ADMINISTRATIVE REGISTER, Volume 51, Number 02.