

**MINUTES OF THE
SOUTHWEST FLORIDA REGIONAL PLANNING COUNCIL
January 18, 2024, MEETING**

The virtual zoom meeting of the Southwest Florida Regional Planning Council’s Executive Board was held on January 18, 2024. Governor Appointee and Council Chair, Mr. Don McCormick called the meeting to order at 9:00 a.m. There was a quorum of the Executive Committee present.

BOARD MEMBERS PRESENT

Charlotte County: Mr. Don McCormick – Chair, Councilwoman Dr. Debi Lux

Collier County: Commissioner Bill McDaniel

Glades County: None

Hendry County: Mr. Mel Karau (zoom)

Lee County: None

Sarasota County: None

Ex-Officio Members: Mr. Phil Flood, SFWMD

OTHERS PRESENT

Ms. Margaret Wuerstle - Executive Director, SWFRPC

Ms. Rebekah Harp – SWFRPC

Mr. Jaha Cummings – SWFRPC

Ms. Julie Bankston – SWFRPC Vista

Ms. Asmaa Odeh – SWFRPC – (zoom)

Ms. Catherine Peralta – SWFRPC Vista - (zoom)

AGENDA ITEM #6(a)
MINUTES OF THE SEPTEMBER 21, 2023, COUNCIL/EXECUTIVE MEETING

Chairman Donald McCormick offered a motion to approve the minutes of the September 21, 2023, Council/Executive Committee meeting. Commissioner Bill McDaniel seconded the motion to approve the minutes of the September 21, 2023, Council/Executive Committee meeting. The motion was approved unanimously.

AGENDA ITEM #7(a)
FINANCIALS: September 2023 Financials

AGENDA ITEM #7(b)
FINANCIALS: FY22-23 Fiscal Year End Closeout Budget Amendment

Commissioner Bill McDaniel offered a motion to approve the September financials and the FY22-23 Fiscal Year End Budget Amendment. Chairman Donald McCormick seconded the motion to approve the September financials and the FY22-23 Fiscal Year End Budget Amendment. The motion was approved unanimously.

AGENDA ITEM #8
CONSENT AGENDA
Relevancy Discussion

Discussed under the Director's Report Agenda Item.

AGENDA ITEM #9
DIRECTORS REPORT

Ms. Margaret Wuerstle provided a brief update on the USDA Regional Agriculture SWFL Fresh Marketing Plan. Ms. Wuerstle explained that the USDA grant was a result of a few grants that were awarded to the SWFRPC after Hurricane Irma where the growers lost a lot of their crops. DEO funded a study with the small to mid-size growers to understand what would make them more resilient. From that study EDA stepped in and asked what needed to be funded from that plan and the growers said they needed a brand for SW Florida. EDA funded a study for the SWFRPC to develop a brand, which is the "SWFL Fresh, Choose Local, Choose Fresh." During the grant COVID hit which held back the huge marketing kickoff event. Then USDA funded the marketing piece to get the tag line and logo out to the public. Ms. Wuerstle turned it over to Mr. Jaha Cummings to further explain the marketing. Mr. Cummings explained that there was a need for a bigger profile, which now we have billboards in every county in the region as well as Television and radio commercials starting this month and will continue for six months. We have NBC, ABC, Wink, CW, several radio stations, social media and also on Lee Pitts Live. We

have them going a few times a day for the next few months. Examples of billboards were displayed, and the television commercial was played for the members. Ms. Wuerstle explained that there is also a website that lists all of the growers along with recipes, what's in season, and where all of the farmer's markets are located. Ms. Harp provided the website address of swflfresh.com as requested by Councilwoman Lux. Ms. Wuerstle continued to explain that the tag line and logo is trademarked. Ms. Wuerstle clarified for Commissioner McDaniel that Blue Zones match was not a 50% match, and that Blue Zones provided a \$106,000 match. Ms. Wuerstle explained that this is a huge grant and that in addition to the billboards and commercial, we have stickers for produce, t-shirts, hats, and grocery totes which are passed out at local farmers markets that staff attends in getting the word out. Councilwoman Debi Lux suggested a booth at the Taste of Punta Gorda on March 3rd.

Ms. Wuerstle explained that there is a second food grant through the State CDBG mitigation to address food insecurity. Ms. Wuerstle continued to explain that staff has been working on this grant for a few years looking at what are the resources and assets that we have here in SW Florida and what are the gaps and what is needed to get the food out. Initially, the idea of having a physical food hub was what we thought the solution was. However, we have heard from the small to mid-size growers that they don't need to be constricted by a physical location and that they would benefit more by having a virtual food hub and marketplace. Staff has been looking for funding for a virtual food hub. We recently put in for an EDA grant, which we were just notified that we were not awarded. Asmaa Odeh explained that USDA – FDACS awarded 400 million across the US consisting of a mix of both brick and mortar and virtual food hubs. The Southeast Region of the award covers Florida and Georgia, and we are hoping that we will have the opportunity to work with them.

Ms. Wuerstle introduced Ms. Julie Bankston, who is a VISTA volunteer with ACT (Abuse Counseling & Treatment). Ms. Bankston explained the mission of ACT is to provide safe and confidential services of victims of domestic violence, sexual assault and human trafficking in Lee, Hendry, and Glades County. Ms. Bankston explained that all the services are free. ACT provides a 24-hour hotline, shelter for those in need, legal services for families, children and single parents, counseling, and community education. Ms. Bankston stated that her role is a community educator to help explain and educate the community that through their eyes and ears the community helps those that might be experiencing abuse or trafficking. Florida ranks #3 in the US for human trafficking, #1 is California and #2 is Texas, which is why it is critical for the community to keep their eyes and ears open. Ms. Bankston announced that ACT is holding a fundraising event on February 3rd called the Power of the Purse and to remember that ACT services are all free.

Commissioner McDaniel asked Ms. Bankston to please be sure to provide her information to him and his office. Commissioner McDaniel explained that he is a huge advocate of non-duplication of services and that he is aware of efforts in Collier County relating to human trafficking and asked Ms. Bankston to share with him what she is working on so that he can share with those working on human trafficking for a more efficient collaboration.

Ms. Wuerstle provided a few updates on the recovery and resiliency projects and grants that the SWFRPC's is currently working on:

Recovery and Resiliency Projects

- AWARDED: \$78,000 Grant for Marco Island Vulnerability Assessment
- AWARDED: \$75,000 Grant for Master Plan for Shrimp Industry and Working Waterfront
- SUBMITTED: \$500,000 NOAA Grant for Shrimp Industry to rebuild docks lost in Hurricane Ian
- NOT AWARDED: \$37,205,000 NOAA grant submitted to rebuild resilient docks for Shrimp Fishing industry.
- SUBMITTED: \$16,000,000 grant for the City of Clewiston WWTP grant to EDA Disaster Supplemental for upgrades and improvements.
- NOT AWARDED: \$562,856 Grant submitted to EDA Disaster Supplemental for a Food System Resiliency Plan Virtual Food Hub.
- NOT AWARDED: \$487,392 Grant to EDA for Glades County Recomplete Strategy.

Ms. Wuerstle wanted to let everyone know that FRCA is in the process of incorporating as a non-profit. EDA explained to FRCA that if they received a non-profit designation, then FRCA could directly apply for EDA funding.

Lastly, Ms. Wuerstle discussed that the letter to the Governor was submitted by email and by certified mail and that we have not heard any response.

Commissioner McDaniel asked if there were any responses from other members of the Council? Ms. Wuerstle responded that there were no other responses. Commissioner McDaniel asked Mr. McCormick if he had read the package that was sent out to the Governor and the members of the Council? Mr. McCormick responded yes that he read the package.

Commissioner McDaniel explained that he was the member that requested the letter to be sent to the governor and asked for a reconstitution and recharter of our organization so there is a chance of survival. Commission McDaniel explained that the financials show that this is a sinking ship. The letter that was sent to the Governor, as interpreted by the Collier County attorney, was asking for permission to sue the counties to pay their fees. Commissioner McDaniel continued to explain that this wasn't what he asked for. The motion that Commissioner McDaniel made, specifically said to ask the Governor for a recharter and reconstitution. Commissioner McDaniel said he got lost in the letter and all the information

that was included and that he was disappointed. He continued to explain that he was dealing with personal issues during the time the letter was generated.

Commissioner Bill McDaniel offered a motion to generate a one-page letter to the Governor asking for a reconstitution and a recharter of our organization with a separate document of the draft of the MOU and by-laws that was already developed.

Commissioner McDaniel continued to explain that the Collier County Attorney's interpretation of the letter was that that RPC was looking for permission from the Governor to sue its members.

Ms. Wuerstle responded that the letter certainly did not say that nor was that our intent. Mr. McCormick added that as the management that signed the letter, he certainly was not signing a document that I thought was asking for legal action. He plead innocent to the charge. Mr. McCormick apologized for taking a different direction than what was intended by Commissioner McDaniel.

Commissioner McDaniel continued to express that the SWFRPC is a sinking ship, and that this organization cannot survive on grant funding and administration fees. A shift must occur. We have tried for years to reorganize and reconstitute this organization. You cannot continue to do what you've always done and expect different results. A simple answer is that the Governor can wave his magic wand and make this all happen and then we take back by statute, by law, the organizations that are part of the SWFRPC to engage them and bring them back in.

Commissioner Bill McDaniel offered a motion to generate a one-page letter to the Governor asking for a reconstitution and a recharter of our organization under the lines of the draft constitution, amendments, and by-laws.

Ms. Wuerstle added that she would draft the letter and send it to Commissioner McDaniel for review before it goes out. Commissioner McDaniel agreed that he was ok with that if the Chairman, Mr. McCormick was also ok with that and to also send the letter to Mr. McCormick. Mr. McCormick agreed and explained that with the one-page letter the Governor's office with hopefully respond and not ignore.

Commissioner McDaniel explained that the information that was sent to the Governor was so voluminous and that one of the reasons, he suspects, that we are not getting any responses from our colleagues that are supposedly serving on this board is that their council came up with the same opinion of the letter that was sent to the Governor, which is, give us the authority to force these people to pay. That is not the goal here. The goal is to engage the members of the council and have an organization that functions and then reduce the fee structure down so that there is a reoccurring revenue source, and we are not living off one time grant fees that are not a reoccurring revenue source, so that the sustainability of our organization can stay in place. That is the goal.

Ms. Wuerstle clarified with Commissioner McDaniel, that he wanted to include the draft MOU and by-laws. Commissioner McDaniel confirmed and continued to provide background on DCA and the authority the RPC used to have. When the authority went away, this organization continued to operate under the old by-laws, which we are probably supposed to, dragging people in to give reports to an organization that has no authority. We are just an advisory organization at best.

Mr. McCormick responded that we have an authority that has been ignored and that the authority is that we provide two things, we provide an audit, and we provide a source of revenue. Unfortunately, our source of revenue has been negatively impacted but in terms of things like applying for grants for all these things, we have an authority granted by the state legislature, as far as he knows, has never been rescinded. However, we have independently endured people saying that we do not have a revenue source that doesn't exist and that we only have the requirement to exist as an organization and not to fund the organization. Mr. McCormick believes that the one-page letter is a good idea at this point and would like to send the letter. He believes that there is a real need in the Southwest Florida area for this to be a functioning group that no one can replace.

Commissioner McDaniel responded that no one disagrees, the problem is your leaving an end on that legal authority to charge the membership, that's not part of the discussion. The discussion needs to be recharter, reconstitute, and reorganize the organization. Then come back with a fee structure. Commissioner McDaniel continued to explain the miscommunication of the letter.

Commissioner McDaniel explained that this is a statutorily created organization that could have phenomenal benefits for the community, but it can't as we are currently operating. It has the legal authority to apply for grants and do all the good things as a statutorily created organization, but it can't function with the current set of by-laws and constitution that we currently have. The current by-laws still dictate that the RPC bring in the developers to present to this organization for approval along with comp plan amendments. It has all the old irrelevant circumstances that were law back in the day when the Department of Community Affairs was in existence. Commissioner McDaniel continued to explain the history behind the disbandment of DCA. Commissioner McDaniel explained that this organization never amended its rules after the legislation changed.

Ms. Wuerstle clarified that we do not bring comp plans for approval. The only thing we bring to you for approval are amendments to the DRIs, and we are still required to do that. Ms.

Wuerstle also asked for clarification on what to send to the Governor. Ms. Wuerstle listed the draft MOU, that you (Commissioner McDaniel) and I worked on attached to the letter. Commissioner responded, yes as a separate document, with a one-page document asking for a recharter, reconstitute, and reorganize of the RPC and McDaniel reiterated the draft by-laws and constitution that you and I and this organization looked at and gave opinions on over two or three years ago.

Commissioner McDaniel would like to go over the letter during the next meeting and asked if the meetings are quarterly. Ms. Wuerstle responded that the meetings are back to monthly, and the next meeting is scheduled for February 15th.

Commissioner McDaniel would like to review a draft along with the Chair before it goes out to the public and try to get it to the Governor before the end of this session which is the end of February. We can wait until the next meeting to get the letter approved before it is sent off and he has no problem with the Executive Committee reviewing the form and format and asks if Mr. Phil Flood would also like to weigh in. Mr. Flood responded that he would be happy to take a look.

Commissioner McDaniel would like to shoot for a deadline of the end of January to get the draft letter out to himself, Chair Don McCormick, and Mr. Phil Flood for review. Commissioner McDaniel explains that once he and Don ratifies the document then it can be disseminated to the rest of the council and then it can go to the Governors office.

Ms. Wuerstle agrees with the deadline.

Mr. McCormick would like the letter to be on the agenda for the February meeting so that all participating members can see what we are trying to accomplish.

Commissioner McDaniel would like to get the letter to Governor DeSantis before the end of the session in hopes to have a discussion and catch the Governor in his office in February when McDaniel goes back to Tallahassee.

Commissioner McDaniel explained that he is willing to make a special trip to Tallahassee to explain what the thought process is and what we are looking to do and how we are looking for rectification. Commissioner McDaniel clarified that he will go through Collier County's lobbyist and get a meeting with the Governor's office for the discussion.

**AGENDA ITEM #10
COMMITTEE REPORTS**

No Committee Reports were given.

**AGENDA ITEM #10(a)
EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE**

There was no update given.

**AGENDA ITEM #10(b)
QUALITY OF LIFE & SAFETY COMMITTEE**

There was no update given.

**AGENDA ITEM #11
NEW BUSINESS**

No new business was discussed.

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

Mr. Phil Flood provided a few updates on the reservoir, appropriations subcommittee budget and funding requests.

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

Commissioner McDaniel provided a brief update regarding hurricane Ian storm surge of the beaches and inland flooding and how dredging could be an optimal solution for storm surge. Commissioner McDaniel also provided an update that he was successful during his last trip to Tallahassee in December, in getting the Collier County Veterans Nursing Home moving forward currently in this cycle with a potential of groundbreaking in 2026-2027.

Commissioner Dr. Debi Lux added that in the City of Punta Gorda are all canals and they still have issues with flooding. She respectfully disagrees that dredging is the answer but agrees that mangroves are huge with it. Commissioner Lux explained that she has been doing research and suggested reaching out to the Charlotte Harbor Environmental Center and asked if everyone was aware of the oyster study that helps clean the water when talking about the salt water. The second thing Commissioner Lux mentioned is that as the founder of Lee-Collier Honor Flight she would like to thank you for finding the extra funding and help for our veterans

which is a huge deal. Commissioner Lux stated that she is new to this and thanked everyone for having her.

**AGENDA ITEM #14
ADJOURN**

The meeting adjourned at 9:59 a.m.

Don McCormick, Chairman

The meeting was duly advertised in the January 8, 2024, issue of the FLORIDA ADMINISTRATIVE REGISTER, Volume 50, Number 05.