

Emerald Coast Regional Council

Meeting Minutes

The Chautauqua Building

95 Circle Drive

DeFuniak Springs, FL 32435

May 21, 2025, 11:30am

**Members Present:**

Kurvin Qualls, Governor Appointee, Chair
Mayor Tracy Andrews, City of Chipley
Councilmember Jim Bagby, City of Destin
Darryl Boudreau, NWFLWMD (Virtual)
Tanya Branton, FDOT
Mayor Bob Campbell, City of DeFuniak Springs
Commissioner Doug Crosby, Bay County (Virtual)
Kasey Cuchens, Governor Appointee
Commissioner Danny Glidewell, Walton County
Commissioner Trey Goodwin, Okaloosa County (Virtual)
Mayor Pamn Henderson, City of Callaway
Mayor Heather Lindsay, City of Milton
Councilmember Bill Schaetzle, City of Niceville
Councilmember David Schmidt, City of Fort Walton Beach
J.D. Smith, Governor Appointee
Councilmember April Sutton, City of Mary Esther
Mayor JB Whitten, City of Crestview

Others Present:

Joel Bradley, WarrenAverett
Macy Falcon, Kimley-Horn
Scott Farmer, Southeastern Regional Planning Council
Lexi Harris
Kimberly Sarra, WarrenAverett
Chelsea Sharon, Okaloosa County
Allison Sullivan, Okaloosa County
Chris Wallace, City of DeFuniak Springs
Cory Wilkinson, HDR
Mark Wood, Kimley-Horn
Kandase Lee, ECRC
Dawn Schwartz, ECRC
Renee Quick, ECRC
Ada Clark, ECRC
Annie Arguello, ECRC
Rae Emary, ECRC (Virtual)
Gary Kramer, ECRC
Leandra Meredith, ECRC
Tammy Neal, ECRC

Jill Nobles, ECRC (Virtual)
Roshita Taylor, ECRC

Members Not Present:

Commissioner Steven Barry, Escambia County
Councilmember Paul Casto, City of Panama City Beach
Commissioner Jack Griffis, City of Springfield
Councilmember Casey Jones, City of Pensacola
Elizabeth Orr, FL Department of Environmental Protection
Commissioner Andrew Palmer, Okaloosa County
Commissioner Claire Pease, Bay County
Mayor JB Schluter, City of Gulf Breeze
Mayor Ann Sexton, City of Paxton
Commissioner Kerry Smith, Santa Rosa County
Commissioner Earl Stafford, Holmes County
Commissioner Josh Street, City of Panama City
Commissioner Steven Stroberger, Escambia County
Commissioner Judy Vandegrift, City of Lynn Haven
Commissioner Colten Wright, Santa Rosa County

Call to Order

Chair Qualls called the meeting to order.

Call for Prayer and Pledge of Allegiance

The prayer was led by Mayor Heather Lindsay, and the Pledge of Allegiance was recited.

Roll Call and Recognition of Virtual Members and Attendees

Chair Qualls welcomed those in attendance and introductions were made.

Public Forum:

Chair Qualls opened the Public Forum.

Scott Farmer, Executive Director of the Southeast Alabama Regional Planning and Development Commission, thanked the Board and provided an update on transportation priorities. He emphasized the need for increased north-south highway capacity, particularly the four-laning of Highway 167 to connect with Florida's Highway 79. A 2020 BUILD grant-funded feasibility study was completed in 2022, and the next step is a more detailed corridor study. Scott Farmer highlighted the corridor's importance for economic development, emergency evacuation, and regional connectivity, and requested ECRC's consideration for collaboration and support, including future BUILD grant applications.

Councilmember Bagby acknowledged the strength of east-west connections (e.g., I-10, Highway 90), but stressed the need for improved north-south access to support both emergency planning and long-term economic opportunities. Councilmember Bagby expressed support for the corridor initiative.

Councilmember Schmidt gave full support for the potential collaborative efforts, citing multiple benefits beyond tourism, including improved access to medical services, support for freight traffic, enhanced evacuation routes, and regional economic development.

Councilmember Bagby moved to provide Southeast Alabama Regional Planning and Development Commission with ECRC's full support, offer assistance for future collaboration, and issue a letter of support for any future grant applications. The motion was seconded by Councilmember Schmidt and was unanimously approved.

Action Items

Item 1: Approval of the February 19, 2025 Meeting Minutes and March 14, 2025 Executive Committee Meeting Minutes

Chair Qualls asked for action on the February 19, 2025 meeting minutes and March 14, 2025 Executive Committee meeting minutes.

JD Smith moved to approve the February 19, 2025 meeting minutes and the March 14, 2025 Executive Committee meeting minutes as presented. The motion was seconded by Mayor Henderson and was unanimously approved.

Item 2: Approval of January – March 2025 Financial Statements

Chair Qualls asked for action on the January – March 2025 financial statements.

Mayor Whitten requested clarification of the membership rate structure and how it was determined.

Dawn Schwartz, ECRC CFO, explained that local contributions from TPO members were originally established as a match for 5305 federal planning funds. The continuation of these contributions was approved by a vote of the TPO board members and is determined on a per capita basis.

Vice Chair Sutton moved to approve the January – March 2025 financial statements. The motion was seconded by Mayor Henderson and was unanimously approved.

Item 3: Presentation and Approval of the Independent Financial Audit FY2024

Chair Qualls introduced Joel Bradley, CPA Warren Averett. Joel Bradley stated that Emerald Coast Regional (ECRC) procured the services of Warren Averett to conduct annual audits of the ECRC financial statements for a period of three (3) years and explained the purpose of the annual audit, as described by professional standards, was to render opinions on financial statements prepared by ECRC staff through auditing agency oversight.

Joel Bradley reported that the Council complied, in all material aspects, with the types of compliance requirements for each major federal program and state project that could have a direct and material effect on each of its programs for the fiscal year ending September 30, 2024.

Joel Bradley stated that a comparison of regional councils across the state was completed, and it was determined that ECRC was in an exceptionally good financial position, adding that ECRC had healthy reserves available to withstand financial emergencies or fund capital purchases without having to borrow funds.

Councilmember Bagby moved to approve the independent financial audit FY2024. The motion was seconded by Vice Chair Sutton and was unanimously approved.

Item 4: Recommendations from March 14, 2025 Executive Committee Meeting

Chair Qualls provided a brief summary of the Executive Committee's recommendations from the March 14, 2025 meeting to include a Severance Package and Annual Leave Proposal and discussed a supplemental employment agreement for the CEO position aimed at supporting recruitment and retention.

Severance Package and Annual Leave Proposal:

- A severance package beginning at twelve (12) weeks, increasing by two (2) weeks per year of service, up to a maximum of twenty (20) weeks at 100% salary, to include health benefits.
- Maintaining the current Annual Leave policy for earned annual leave for staff and allowing 200 hours to be carried over to the next fiscal year. The Committee discussed and recommended the following for the position of CEO:
 - Adding a new category of forty (40) hours of Administrative Leave for the CEO.
 - Allowing 200 hours of Annual Leave per calendar year.
 - Permitting a total of 240 hours (Administrative + Annual Leave) to be carried over.

Supplemental Employment Agreement:

A supplemental employment agreement to include the following:

- A severance package with 100% pay which includes health insurance, leave (annual and admin leave), benefits (not including retirement and life).
- An Administrative Leave of forty (40) hours annually to be in addition to the Annual Leave for CEO.

The Committee recommended that the contract be finalized and in place by the start of the next fiscal year.

Chair Qualls opened the floor for discussion.

Councilmember Bagby clarified that Florida Statute limits severance to 20 weeks and does not guarantee it. He expressed concern that offering 12 weeks upon hire could imply entitlement, emphasizing that severance should remain a discretionary tool used by the board based on each situation.

Kasey Cuchens agreed with Councilmember Bagby and expressed understanding that the committee was tasked with developing a general severance package framework, not tied to a specific individual, with the purpose of establishing optional parameters for future negotiations, rather than creating a guaranteed benefit.

Vice Chair Sutton clarified that the purpose of this effort was to establish a general severance package framework, as the board previously had no such guidelines for the CEO position. The intent is to provide parameters for future use, with the final decision left to the board based on the circumstances of each separation.

Commissioner Goodwin questioned the immediate value of establishing a severance package framework, noting that any future agreement would still require board approval. While acknowledging the framework aligns with statutory limits, Commissioner Goodwin felt it may be premature without a clear need. He also expressed concern about the proposed addition of 40 hours of annual leave for the CEO and emphasized the importance of analyzing the direct and indirect economic impact of both proposals before moving forward.

Councilmember Bagby moved to approve a severance package in accordance with Florida Statutes, consisting of 20 weeks of compensation, 20 weeks of health benefits, up to 200 hours of PTO as the maximum allowable compensation, specifying that if the CEO voluntarily separates, all rights to the severance package is forfeited, and to include a hold harmless or release on all actions clause. The motion was seconded by Councilmember Schmidt and was approved with Vice Chair Sutton, Mayor Henderson, Mayor Lindsay, Mayor Andrews, and JD Smith voting in opposition.

Item 5: Resolution ECRC 2025-04, South Navy Boulevard Letter of Support

Jill Nobles stated Escambia County requested a letter of support from ECRC as they pursue federal funding for the South Navy Boulevard Corridor Management Plan, using HDR as the planning consultant.

Jill Nobles stated this project will provide improvements to a one-mile segment of South Navy Boulevard (SR 295) from Barrancas Avenue to the Sam A. Lovelace Bridge, the main entrance to Naval Air Station (NAS) Pensacola, where more than 21,500 daily vehicle users and over 15,000 residents of the Warrington Census-Designated Place and Warrington Community Redevelopment Area, and the approximately 23,000 personnel on board NAS Pensacola, will benefit from this project.

Vice Chair Sutton moved to authorize the CEO to sign a letter of support for federal funding for the South Navy Boulevard Corridor Management Implementation. The motion was seconded by JD Smith and was unanimously approved.

Item 6: Approval of the Amended FY 2024-2025 Budget and Work Program

Kandase Lee presented a budget and work program amendment for the current fiscal year (FY24-25) related to the \$10 million Safe Streets for All demonstration grant. As previously approved in February, negotiations are underway with the Federal Highway Administration. The amendment accounts for expected encumbrances through September 30, 2025. Kandase Lee stated the final grant agreement is pending due to delays from a federal administration transition, but Federal Highway has received the updated agreement template.

Mayor Lindsay moved to approve the amended FY 2024-2025 Budget and Work Program. The motion was seconded by Vice Chair Sutton and was unanimously approved.

Item 7: Resolution ECRC 2025-05, Approval and Adoption of the FL-AL TPO Fiber Optic Cable Design LAP Agreement and Issue an RFQ for the Selection of a Design Firm

Kandase Lee explained that ECRC, as the lead agency for the Florida-Alabama TPO, continues to support regional intelligent transportation system (ITS) improvements. This includes efforts such as the \$10 million Safe Streets for All grant and the \$22.5 million Transportation Management Center. Kandase Lee stated FDOT has added fiber optic design projects to its work program for areas in Santa Rosa and Escambia counties and is seeking to partner with ECRC through a Local Agency Program contract. Staff requested approval to negotiate and execute the \$537,000 agreement and to issue a Request for Qualifications (RFQ) for a design firm.

Mayor Lindsay moved to authorize the ECRC chair to sign Resolution ECRC 2025-05, adopting the FL-AL TPO Fiber Optic Cable Design LAP Agreement and Issue an RFQ for the selection of a design firm. The motion was seconded by Kasey Cuchens and was unanimously approved.

Chair Qualls introduced Tanya Branton, Planning Specialist with FDOT, and requested an update.

Tanya Branton presented a brief overview of the FDOT 2050 Strategic Intermodal System (SIS) Unfunded Needs Plan.

Tanya Branton gave a brief update on rural projects. The SR-20 Passing Lane Study (17.7 miles) is underway with completion expected in Fall 2025. The SR-285 Feasibility Study (14.8 miles) is in the early planning phase. A public hearing on the US-90 SUN Trail Project in Okaloosa County is scheduled for Fall 2025. FDOT will also hold a virtual update on the SUN Trail Project in Walton County, covering two segments totaling 4.3 miles.

Item 8: Resolution ECRC 2025-06, Approval and Adoption of the Regional Rural Transportation Plan Project Priorities FY 2027-2031

Gary Kramer, stated in February 2023, the Regional Rural Transportation Plan (RRTP) and its associated project priorities list were adopted. While the plan is updated every five (5) years, the rural project priorities will be reviewed and adopted annually.

Gary Kramer stated at the April 17, 2024 meeting, the ECRC Board initiated the RRTP process to align with the TPOs' Project Priorities process, enabling FDOT to incorporate rural projects into its five-year work program. Three (3) RRTP workshops were held virtually and/or in person throughout the region.

Gary Kramer stated at the March 19, 2025 meeting, it was noted that Resurfacing Priority #8 - Highway 196 (Barrineau Park Road) from US 29 to Highway 95A has been completed by Escambia County. Therefore, it is recommended Priority #8 be removed from the list and priorities below this project each be moved up one spot in the Resurfacing Project Priorities; i.e., Number 9 will become Number 8; Number 10 will become Number 9; and the new number 10 will be Pecan Street in Washington County from US 90 to East Church Avenue.

Tiffany Bates provided a snapshot of feedback from a rural project priorities survey conducted from March 10 to April 25, which received 126 responses. Social media and email were the top outreach methods, with over forty-one (41) social media shares and engagement from thirty-seven (37) direct partners. Additional outreach included press releases, IFAS offices, and county commissions. Responses came from forty (40) unique ZIP codes, with the highest participation from Okaloosa County (Baker, Crestview, Laurel Hill).

Tiffany Bates shared survey results on transportation experiences in rural areas. About seventy (70%) of respondents reported commutes longer than thirty (30) minutes, and eighty (80%) experienced congestion daily or frequently. She stated the top perceived causes were peak hour congestion and limited roadway connections. High traffic demand, school traffic, and seasonal tourism also ranked high. Construction and road work ranked lowest as a concern. Further stating when asked to prioritize transportation needs, reducing congestion ranked highest, followed by improving economic access, emergency response routes, intersection improvements, and road maintenance, while expanding travel options like transit and biking ranked lowest, likely due to limited rural feasibility.

Tiffany Bates noted this was the first opportunity to conduct this type of survey and outreach in rural communities during the prioritization process. She shared that the project has been an exciting initiative for the marketing team, and that current findings will be incorporated into formal reports to help track trends and better integrate rural community input into future planning.

Vice Chair Sutton asked if coordinating with major employers and school districts to stagger start and end times had been explored as a possible solution to reduce congestion in rural communities, noting that while new roads offer long-term benefits, they take years to complete, and alternative approaches could provide more immediate relief.

Tiffany Bates stated that in Escambia County, Navy Federal Credit Union has worked closely with local agencies to explore staggered start and stop times, while similar efforts are occurring at Hurlburt Field and Eglin AFB, though high population density limits options.

Kandase Lee highlighted efforts with Navy Federal Credit Union, including signal timing adjustments on interstate exits and Nine Mile Road, and turn lane extensions to improve congestion. She noted traffic patterns are also influenced by driver behavior. Kandase Lee acknowledged Bay County TPO Chair Mayor Henderson for her advocacy regarding transportation improvements at Callaway School, which resulted in on-site assessments and planned upgrades.

Councilmember Schmidt expressed the need to encourage the local public works staff to continue exploring creative solutions to influence app routing and reduce traffic impacts in neighborhoods, noting successful efforts near Highway 98 and 85 by the new Brooks Bridge as an example.

Kandase Lee shared that the FL-AL TPO is exploring real-time traffic data solutions, including a potential partnership with Waze. At their upcoming technology meeting, a consultant will demonstrate how probe data can be used to develop dashboards and tools to better understand and influence driver behavior.

Vice Chair Sutton moved authorize the ECRC chair to sign Resolution ECRC 2025-06, adopting the Transportation Regional Plan Project Priorities FY 2027-2031 with the recommendation that project number 9 will become number 8; project number 10 will become number 9; and a new number 10 will be added: Pecan Street in Washington County from US 90 to East Church Avenue.. The motion was seconded by JD Smith and was unanimously approved.

Information Items:

Item 9: ECRC Project Highlight – LEPC

Jason Arnold, LEPC Coordinator, provided an overview of the Emerald Coast Local Emergency Planning Committee (LEPC), which includes 45 members from emergency management, fire departments, health departments, and environmental agencies. The committee's core responsibilities include training, planning, and reporting on hazardous materials.

Jason Arnold highlighted recent training efforts, including sending members to the Florida Hazmat Symposium and hosting 160-hour and 8-hour hazmat courses. Small quantity generators and Tier II facilities are monitored and LEPC supports emergency response planning, plume modeling, and facility preparedness.

Jason Arnold also noted the LEPC's public outreach through regional notices, meetings, and presentations, as well as recent emergency exercises with the Pensacola Airport and an upcoming full-scale exercise in Pace.

Item 10: Data Analytics Phase I

Mark Wood of Kimley-Horn provided an update on the data analytics platform developed in partnership with ECRC, noting that Phase 1 is nearing completion and explained the importance

of a "data lake," a scalable storage system that collects and organizes data from various sources, which allows for long-term data retention and centralized access.

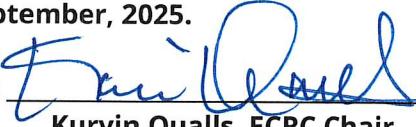
Mark Wood explained that the platform uses data from Myovision cameras, processed and stored using Minio, MySQL, and Docker, and demonstrated its capabilities with a Power BI dashboard visualizing traffic data.

Mark Wood stated that Phase 2 will focus on expanding data sources such as Waze, increasing data capture, supporting on-premises deployment at the RTMC, and improving data visualization tools.

Adjournment

With no further business, the meeting was adjourned at 1:37pm.

Duly passed and approved by the Emerald Coast Regional Council on this 22nd day of September, 2025.

By: 
Kurvin Qualls, ECRC Chair

Date: 9/22/2025