

MARCH 15, 2005 – SPECIAL MEETING

The Board of County Commissioners, Walton County, Florida, held a Joint Workshop with the Economic Development Council on Tuesday, March 15, 2005 at 5:00 p.m. at the South Walton Chamber of Commerce.

The following Board members were present: Commissioner Larry Jones, Chairman Kenneth Pridgen, Commissioner Cuchens, and Commissioner Scott Brannon. Mr. Ronnie Bell, County Administrator, and Ms. Kira Coley, Staff Attorney.

The following EDC Council Members were present: Mr. Tom Powell, Executive Director; Albert Paris, President; Mike Richards; Barbara Jones; Bobby Rains, and Pam Tedesco.

Chairman Pridgen called the meeting to order and Mr. Albert Paris welcomed those present.

Mr. Powell gave an update on the following topics:

1. Previous projects
2. Projects the EDC has worked on since the last meeting
3. Update on Florida's Great Northwest
4. Outlook for future projects
5. EDC's efforts to increase funding from private sources

Mr. Powell stated that several projects had previously signed contracts for the purchase of land in the Freeport Industrial Park. FRC Industries has erected a building and is providing jobs, which is assisting the City of Freeport in meeting the job requirement for grant funding. Another Company is Larry Batchler Mechanical Contracting. Mr. Powell reported that one company who sells Classic Cookie Dough has recently changed their plans and will not locate in the park. They will still construct the

building, which will create ten (10) new jobs. He also advised that Science International had to cancel their plans due to an unacceptable arrangement with one of their customers.

Mr. Powell gave an overview of new projects. He stated that they have submitted proposals to about 20 new businesses and several other companies who were considering expansion in this area. (Ms. Sally Merrifield arrived) The EDC has hosted 10 site visits by perspective businesses. The EDC has contracts to sell three parcels. They have reactivated the Mossy Head Coordinating Committee for the Mossy Head Industrial Park. HDR Engineering is under contract to research the best access to the industrial park. Mr. Powell also commented that they hosted the annual public review of the strategic plan for Walton County. The only change discussed was the importance of affordable housing, which is now listed as a major goal of the plan. The EDC also met with Eglin regarding additional facilities and jobs in Walton County.

Mr. Powell advised that Florida's Great Northwest and the EDC are aggressively marketing Northwest Florida. He stated that they have advertised extensively in real estate magazines for site selections of industrial sites.

Mr. Powell reviewed the major outcomes for Florida's Great Northwest, which ended with 46 projects being actively worked on with more than half being generated by Florida's Great Northwest. He advised that they were also involved in assisting with the family dollar plant currently located in Marianna.

Mr. Powell gave an overview of future projects. He commented that Walton County's economic activity is very strong. (Commissioner Cuchens arrived)

Mr. Powell reported on the EDC's efforts to increase funding from private sources. Member dues increased 67% over the proceeding year.

Commissioner Jones asked about access to the Mossy Head Industrial Park. Mr. Powell stated that he should receive an answer soon from the engineering firm.

Commissioner Brannon asked about the enterprise zones regarding expiring terms. Mr. Powell said they expire in 2005 according to legislation. He said they have been working with the county's lobbyist to attempt a change in legislation. They have been working to get the bill altered for the current enterprise zones. Mr. Bell stated that he spoke with the lobbyist and it looks like it will be reenacted.

Chairman Pridgen asked about certain criteria regarding wages and affordable housing for businesses who want to locate in Walton County. Mr. Powell stated that they encourage businesses by providing incentives. He stated that \$11.50 is the average wage in the county at the present time. Affordable housing is a challenge.

Commissioner Brannon spoke about housing and urged the EDC to continue working on this issue. He felt that developers need more incentives to be able to offer affordable housing. Mr. Powell stated that the community can encourage affordable housing projects.

Commissioner Jones asked about marketing the Mossy Head properties. Mr. Powell said he was previously given direction not to market the property until all of the planning was completed.

Commissioner Brannon asked about the pricing for the Mossy Head sites and how it is established. Mr. Powell explained that a committee bases the price on market value and then a discount is given based on EDC policy. Some of the criteria is based on the number of employees, pay, and investment. A discount is also allowed if the business assists with infrastructure.

Mr. Powell explained that it is a bidding war with other communities in order to entice a business into the county.

Commissioner Jones reiterated the fact that the board funds the EDC to bring jobs into the county. Discussion was held regarding Mr. Powell receiving direction in the past, not to advertise the park until infrastructure was complete. He was just recently given direction to hire an engineering firm to address the access issue.

Mike Richards voiced his frustrations over not being able to develop the property, but stated that they are ready and willing to promote the park and do whatever is needed to develop it. He stated that they will proceed at the Board's direction. Mr. Powell said they will begin marketing that property immediately. They will negotiate the land and will bring any proposals to the Board for consideration. They can also advertise with Florida's Great Northwest. Mr. Paris stated that they have had discussions with 46 different clients. He stated that they are very much interested in assisting the county.

Mr. Powell submitted a letter to the commissioners and stated that they would be willing to discuss the issues contained therein.

Mr. Bell stated that he had an opportunity to speak with the Department of Transportation and the Railroad about the possibility of a railroad crossing at the park. One business is waiting on the access so they can locate in the park. He stated that the land was purchased with the intent of bringing businesses into the county and that the cost of the land is not as important as getting the business here.

Commissioner Brannon commented that the price of the property should be proportionate to the number of jobs the business brings. He agreed that the land is

expensive, but it would be an injustice to not provide jobs to the people of the county. He suggested offering a performance guarantee. Ms. Merrifield stated that the cost of the property has to be considered when comparing a company who offers two jobs versus a company offering 20 jobs.

Mr. Powell explained that 85% of the companies are looking for locations with existing buildings. Spec buildings are needed to entice people to the park.

Ms. Tedesco spoke about incentives and employment availability. She stated that Walton County has one of the lowest unemployment rates which factors into the issue. If people move into the area, then housing is an issue. Ms. Jones felt that people would be willing to commute.

Mr. Bell spoke about the Boards' trip to Washington D.C. He also presented information that he shared with Congressman Boyd relating to the four-laning of Highway 331. Mr. Bell stated that it is estimated at \$408,500,000.00 to four-lane the road from the bridge to I-10. The cost of the bridge alone is \$306 million. Mr. Rains questioned why an adjacent county is getting two highways four-laned and Walton County hasn't been able to get their only north/south corridor four-laned.

Mr. Powell asked for clarification from the commissioners regarding the direction they want the EDC to follow. Commissioner Brannon stated that better communication with the cities is critical and felt that the coalition will make it better.

Commissioner Jones advised that he has a request on the next agenda regarding proposals for the Mossy Head Park. He asked the EDC to take necessary action to fill the park. Mr. Richards agreed that they will market the property with Florida Great Northwest. Commissioner Jones commented that price is not the first priority. Mr. Powell

asked the Board to consider establishing a set of guidelines for the cost of the property.

Commissioner Jones asked EDC to communicate with county staff.

There being no further business the meeting was adjourned at 6:30 p.m.

APPROVED: \_\_\_\_\_  
Larry D. Jones, Chair

ATTEST: \_\_\_\_\_  
Martha Ingle, Clerk of Court