

**Official Minutes of
MARION COUNTY
BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS**

April 1, 2026

CALL TO ORDER:

The Marion County Board of County Commissioners (BCC) met in a workshop session at 9:05 a.m. on Wednesday, April 1, 2026 at the Southeastern Livestock Pavilion (SELP) located at 2232 NE Jacksonville Road in Ocala, Florida.

INTRODUCTION OF WORKSHOP BY CARL ZALAK, III

Chairman Zalak advised that the joint workshop is scheduled this morning with the Marion County School Board (MCSB) and Municipalities.

Chairman Sarah James, MCSB, expressed appreciation to everyone present.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

The meeting opened with invocation by Chairman Zalak and the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag of our Country.

ROLL CALL

Upon roll call the following members were present: Chairman Carl Zalak, III, District 4; Vice-Chairman Matthew McClain, District 3; Commissioner Craig Curry, District 1; Commissioner Kathy Bryant, District 2; and Commissioner Michelle Stone, District 5. Also present were County Administrator Mounir Bouyounes; Assistant County Administrator (ACA) Angel Roussel; ACA Tracy Straub; and ACA Amanda Tart.

The following members of the MCSB were present: Chairman Sarah James, District 5; Vice-Chairman Lori Conrad, District 2; Board Member Allison Campbell, District 1; Board Member Eric Cummings, District 3; and Board Member Nancy Thrower, District 4. Also present were Superintendent of Marion County Public Schools (MCPS) Dr. Danielle Brewer and School Board Attorney Jeremy Powers.

Also present were Mayor Ben Marciano, City of Ocala; Council President Ire Bethea, Sr, District 2, City of Ocala; Councilmember Kristen Dreyer, District 4, City of Ocala; Councilmember James Hilty, District 5, City of Ocala; Commissioner Ray Dwyer, Seat 2, City of Belleview; Commissioner Ronald Livsey, Seat 3, City of Belleview; Councilmember Valerie Hanchar, Seat 4, City of Dunnellon; It was noted that there was no representation from the Town of McIntosh or the Town of Reddick.

The Deputy Clerk was in receipt of a 105 page Agenda packet to follow along with the PowerPoint presentations.

MINUTES

Minutes from the March 12, 2025 Joint Planning Workshop
ACA Tracy Straub advised that minutes are presented for informational purposes, noting they were formally adopted by the BCC shortly after the March 12, 2025 meeting.

WORKSHOP PRESENTATION

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1. Overview, Tracy Straub, Technical Working Group Chair, Assistant County Administrator, Marion County Board of County Commissioners

ACA Straub presented the following:

Description/Background: Today's meeting convenes the Marion County School Board, the City of Ocala, the City of Belleview, the City of Dunnellon, the Town of Reddick, the Town of McIntosh, and the Marion County Board of County Commissioners. This collaboration is conducted in accordance with the Marion County Third Amended and Restated Interlocal Agreement for Public School Facility Planning (ILA), adopted in 2023, and is pursuant to Sections 163.31777 and 1013.33(2), Florida Statutes. Florida Statutes requires each county and its municipalities must enter into an ILA with the district school board to formally establish how local government planning processes and school district planning will be coordinated.

The ILA further requires these governing bodies to meet at least annually, and that one elected official from each governing body and staff meet more frequently as a Technical Working Group (TWG). A TWG subcommittee composed of the technical staff from each agency has been routinely meeting, sharing and reviewing development data to assist the school district with their immediate and long-range planning efforts.

Ms. Straub advised that BCC, MCSB and municipalities last met on March 12, 2025, noting today's meeting is conducted in accordance with the Third Amended and Restated Interlocal Agreement (ILA) for the public school facility planning. She stated the ILA was adopted in 2023, pursuant to Florida Statute (FS) Sections 163.31777 and 1013.33. Ms. Straub advised that the FS requires each County and its municipalities to enter into this ILA with the School Board to formally establish how local government planning processes and school district planning will be coordinated. The ILA further requires that the governing bodies meet at least annually and that one elected official from each governing body and staff meet more frequently as a technical working group (TWG). The TWG also has a subcommittee, which is composed of technical staff from each agency. That team has been meeting very frequently, if not monthly, every few weeks on end.

2. Marion County Public Schools Update, Dr. Danielle Brewer, Ed. D., Superintendent of Schools, Marion County Public Schools

Superintendent of Schools Dr. Danielle Brewer, MCPS, advised that there are over 45,000 students, 53 traditional schools and 5 charter schools. She stated there are 250 school buses that drive students around this large County everyday, noting there are roughly 1,600 square miles and 23,000 students transported. Dr. Brewer advised that there are nearly 7,000 individuals employed by MCPS.

Dr. Brewer advised that South Marion High School will open in August 2026, which will be the first new high school in 26 years. The school will be located in the southwestern portion of the County and Ken McAteer will be the principle. MCPS anticipates close to 2,000 students will be on that campus. She clarified that Forest High School was built within the last 26 years, but it was a replacement school. Dr. Brewer advised that 2027 MCPS will open Lake Weir Middle School as a replacement campus, noting the ground breaking for this campus is Tuesday, April 7, 2026. She stated the current Lake Weir Middle School was constructed in 1954. Dr. Brewer stated in 2028 Belleview Elementary and Belleview Santos will have a combined school campus on the Belleview Elementary site. She stated staff is working on consolidating the north end elementary campuses.

3. "Tentative Education Facilities Plan" Update, Including the Interlocal Agreement, Vice Chair Stephen Ayres, Technical Working Group, Director of Student Assignment and Records, Marion County Public Schools

Vice Chair Stephen Ayres, TWG, Director of Student Assignment and Records, MCPS, advised that today's presentation covers proposed amendments to the ILA development data and the data assessment that supports school planning. He stated when the subcommittee was meeting with the TWG, they wanted to go ahead and streamline the data collection, as well as use current student enrollment data. Mr. Ayres advised that the ILA revisions that are being proposed are only relating to data and timeline, noting the proposed revisions originate from the TWG subcommittee that collaborated to gather and present development data. The revisions aim to improve the process for future planning efforts. The revisions also clarify issues with the collected data, the actual report, and the meeting timeline. He stated the proposed revisions aim to align the collective development data with student enrollment data to ensure the information remains as current as possible. The proposed revisions also add two appendices that detail the data elements and the collection dates and updates the annual timeline. A red line version showing these changes is included in the Agenda packet.

Mr. Ayers addressed the project the TWG has been working on for the past 18 months, noting the purpose of this project is to strengthen collaboration between public schools and local governments to support data-driven planning and for school capacity and growth. The objectives are to support data-driven decisions on school locations and site planning and to establish annual school facility priorities. The project was developed in partnership with local jurisdictions and would not have been made possible without the strong collaboration of the TWG, particularly the TWG Subcommittee. He recognized Growth Management Director Jeff Shrum, City of Ocala, who serves as the chair of the TWG subcommittee, for all his hard work gathering and ensuring the data is consistent.

Mr. Ayers advised that the TWG Committee has convened five times since September 2024 and the subcommittee has met more than 30 times, in addition to extensive electronic mail (e-mail) coordination. Their collective efforts provided the data and analysis presented today. He expressed appreciation to staff from all participating jurisdictions for their diligent work in collecting and verifying the development data. This collaboration has established a strong foundation for ongoing efforts that will support the district in delivering efficient, high-quality education to the students of Marion County.

Director of Planning Kathie Ebaugh, JB Pro, advised that throughout this project, it has been an ongoing effort of researching data already obtained, requesting new data, and verifying the data. This information has provided a new baseline of data, which is something that Marion County did not have 18 months ago.

Ms. Ebaugh advised that the three levels of information reviewed were future land use, development approvals and permitting. This was in order to understand what the maximum potential build out of residential units, as they are today, identified on the County's Future Land Use Map (FLUM), what development approvals exist in the pipeline and could be constructed and then the permitted ones that are actually going through the construction process. The future land use information was important because it established a ceiling of maximum residential, noting as this process continues, if any future land use changes are made to move from one category into residential, those will be updates that will be made through the process. She stated the reason that this was important is it gave them an understanding of what could happen in the future and

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understanding where currently the residential units are most available in the County. Ms. Ebaugh referred to maps on the overhead screens showing the different municipalities, noting the green areas are all of the properties identified available for residential units that are currently vacant. She stated the City of Belleview has approximately 800 units, City of Dunnellon roughly 1,200 units, Town of McIntosh approximately 40 units, City of Ocala roughly 70,400 units, the Town of Reddick there is about 160 units, and unincorporated Marion County there is approximately 71,400. She stated Countywide when considering vacant residential that is available at the maximum land use there is roughly 444,000 units. Through the planning process the maximum number of units will decline. Ms. Ebaugh advised that the most green areas are in the southwest quadrant of the County. Ms. Ebaugh commented on the development approval process and what is currently approved throughout the County. She stated there are approximately 66,000 units that could move forward to the permitting stage.

Ms. Ebaugh addressed permitting, noting what is expected to be built through an active or issued building permit. She stated there are 36 active permits in the City of Belleview, 2 active permits in the City of Dunnellon, approximately 1,500 in the City of Ocala, and approximately 7,300 active permits in unincorporated Marion County. The southwest quadrant is where most of the active permits are located.

Ms. Ebaugh advised that when JB Pro reviewed the ILA they looked to reset the time frame, noting the original ILA had the time frames in very different places in relationship to when the analysis of development was happening. She stated through the new ILA the development shown is all development that occurred through September 30th, which aligns with the October full time equivalent (FTE) count. This is the number used by the school district. This makes it closer in alignment between when the development is happening and the development is being analyzed and the school district population and enrollment number that is used from October. Ms. Ebaugh advised that they continue to evaluate data throughout the year, noting each quarter new information is received and evaluated from the various jurisdictions. That information is gathered and the analysis is performed in late September/early October. She reiterated that the data collected provides a baseline for the information.

Ms. Ebaugh referred to the overhead screens containing maps showing the vacant land, approved development and permits. She advised that there are roughly 140,000 single family units, 22,000 multifamily units, and 28,000 mobile homes for a total number of residential units of approximately 190,000.

Mr. Ayers stated his job as the Director of Student Assignments and Records is to do enrollment projections and to assist with school planning. He advised that he is a former high school principle, which is where he obtained his knowledge on how schools operate. Mr. Ayers stated for the last 18 months working with the TWG, development planners and development staff he has gained a new respect for the amount of data that is understood, noting the data needs to tell a story. The story being shown here is how development is impacting school growth and school planning. Mr. Ayers advised that the data assists with projections regarding what is needed in the next school year, next 5 years and next 20 years.

Mr. Ayers commented on the current capacity summary for the schools, noting capacity is calculated by comparing current enrollment to available seats. The chart on the overhead screens reflects district enrollment based on the October FTE, which is how the district is funded. The FTE is reported to the State several times a year, but for consistency purposes the enrollment numbers for this project are October's FTE. He

stated the percentage capacity for each school level is shown, noting this October FTE count aligns with the development data and reported going forward. Overall, the utilization of the schools in Marion County are sitting at approximately 93 percent (%). He referred to slides 49 through 51 of the presentation, which show current capacity of the District's traditional elementary schools along with heat maps of the corresponding attendance zones. Overall, the elementary traditional schools are sitting at about 90% capacity, with the north end of the County with more space. The map does represent the two new elementary schools that opened this year to alleviate the southern overcrowding. Slide 52 contains the current elementary capacity alongside the current development layer and vacant land.

Mr. Ayers addressed slides 53 through 55, which shows the current middle school capacity. The current middle school capacity is roughly 82%. He stated slides 56 through 60 present current capacity of the District's traditional high schools along with the heat map and the corresponding attendance zones, noting this is the capacity prior to South Marion High School opening. Updated capacity figures that include South Marion High School will be available in October 2026.

Mr. Ayers advised that student generation rates are used in enrollment projections to estimate the number of students generated by each development type. The District's rates were established through the 2023 Long Range School Planning Study conducted by Benesch in partnership with Marion County Public Schools. He stated when a new multifamily, single family or mobile home comes online they can utilize these student generation rates to predict the number of elementary, middle or high school students that would come from those units. Mr. Ayers advised that student enrollment projections have become more challenging in recent years due to the expansion of school choice in Florida. As parent choice has increased, enrollment in a traditional zone brick and mortar school has declined. Despite record population growth, traditional school enrollment has not kept pace, in part because expanded scholarship and voucher programs provided additional enrollment options. He stated parent choice is a positive thing, but MCPS has to be able to account for parent choice when creating school projections and school enrollment. Prior to 2000 MCPS was able to take the birth rate of students in Marion County and determine the estimated number of kindergarteners that will enter into MCPS. That data is no longer valid because there is such an influx of transient people, people moving into Marion County, moving out, that the birth rate/death rate is not a good correlation. This causes the school projection model to become more and more difficult. Mr. Ayers stated it is important for school districts to develop long range population growth and projections based on development activity and to continually monitor enrollment trends. Annual statutory changes that expand parent choice have made traditional enrollment projections less stable. As a result, more students are moving among district schools, charter schools, private schools, and home education scholarship programs. He advised that continued collaboration with local governments to track development activity in vacant land is essential and expressed appreciation for the ongoing support.

BOARD DISCUSSION AND CLOSING COMMENTS

In response to Chairman Zalak, Mr. Ayers provided a brief overview of how the student generation rate is calculated.

Dr. James expressed appreciation for the comprehensive data being provided. She advised that it is the school district's obligation to respond to the development, noting they are prepared to continue to have tough conversation relating to merging schools, bringing

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sites together and building new schools. Dr. James stated this paints a very clear picture for what they are going to see in the next decade. She stated the school district will have their own conversations on how this will be addressed with the Sales Tax and Impact Fees.

Commissioner Stone expressed appreciation to everyone who participated in the TWG, noting this was not an easy task. She stated the new high school will bring some relief to over capacity in the area.

In response to Commissioner Stone, Mr. Ayers advised that the State wants the County to maintain a minimum of 80% capacity within the schools. He commented on the two new elementary school Winding Oaks and Ross Prairie, noting Ross Prairie is almost at 90% capacity. The State does not want the County expending funds to build empty schools and to have empty school programs. Mr. Ayers stated once a school falls below 80% they start reviewing the possible causes, such as the populace in the area, school choice scholarships etc. He advised that there always has to be capacity for students zoned for that school.

Commissioner Stone advised that the 4th amended ILA is in the works and will be brought forward in 2027 for review and approval.

Mr. Ayers stated today does not end the work of the TWG they will continue this work.

Ms. Conrad expressed appreciation to the TWG for all their hard work.

Mr. Ayers commented on the work that went into aligning everyone's schedule to be able to conduct the TWG meetings. He introduced Xavier Balerdi, School Planner, MCPS, who will become the face of the TWG.

Council Member Valrie Hanchar, City of Dunnellon, commented on the current capacity of the school located in Dunnellon.

In response to Ms. Hanchar, Mr. Ayers advised that by design, elementary schools are smaller than middle schools and middle schools are smaller than high schools. There are over 30 elementary schools, 10 middle schools and 8 high schools in the County. He stated once students reach middle and high school they tend to do school choice.

Mr. Ayers advised that the goal is to educate students in brick and mortar, but portable units are a fact of life because it can meet an immediate demand. Portables are a necessary process to meet demand and be an effective use of taxpayer dollars.

Commissioner Curry questioned if the data provided by the County is being done so in the most efficient way. Mr. Ayers commented on the good working relationship he has with City and County staff. He stated currently the data is being provided in the most efficient way, noting the municipalities and the County have been very responsive.

In response to Chairman Zalak, Mr. Ayers advised that enrollment in Marion County has been stagnant in the last couple of years, noting the **charter school** enrollment has increased. He stated the number one increase is in the scholarship recipients. This number is unpredictable and changes frequently.

Dr. Brewer advised that the majority of the students receiving the Family Empowerment Scholarship never were MCPS students. She stated out of the MCPS \$1,300,000,000.00 budget \$54,000,000.00 of revenue and expenditures reported is not MCPS students. She stated a lot of the private school students who have been private school students their entire lives have been able to apply for and receive the scholarships through the parents choice option, noting MCPS did not lose those students.

Dr. James commented on the growth in Marion County and the unique challenges MCPS is facing.

Mr. Cummings advised that today's meeting is vitally important for future growth and

planning. He expressed appreciation to the TWG for all their hard work.

In response to Mr. Cummings, Mr. Ayers stated the TWG is receiving development data quarterly, which ensures the information is up to date.

Council President Ire Bethea, Sr, City of Ocala, expressed appreciation for the TWG. He commented on concerns relating to the schools in the north end of the County.

Dr. James opined that the School Board is in a position that they have to have some very delicate conversations as a community about campus utilization and how it can be balanced. She stated the conversation occurring now on the north end is related to site utilization, noting there are schools that are under utilized. Reddick is one which is significantly underutilized. Dr. James advised that MCSB is managing the operational budgets effectively and they are keeping what is best for students at the top of their minds. She stated it is a delicate conversation that will continue to take place amongst the community and the MCSB. Ultimately, they have to ensure they are able to deliver quality projects and products to students throughout Marion County. Dr. James advised that a lot of the growth is happening in the southwest portion of the County, but they have to continue to address failing infrastructure throughout the District. She stated the Sales Tax has created a great way to be able to fund projects, but it will require some complicated and complex conversations. Dr. James advised that MCSB uses the County's Comprehensive Plan and Farmland Preservation Area (FPA) boundaries as way to plan, noting they have to be responsive to the County's planning. She stated based on the Comprehensive Plan there will not be a multi-family complex in the Town of Reddick that will magically fill Reddick Collier elementary, noting should the Comprehensive Plan or boundaries shift in the future MCSB would then respond to those changes.

Mr. Cummings commented on the importance of conducting these joint workshops.

Ms. Campbell advised that the MCSB builds for two reasons, capacity or failing infrastructure. She commented on the decline in birth rates across the nation, which has a big impact on where resources are planned.

In response to Chairman Zalak, Mr. Ayers addressed the impact school choice and private schools have on schools, noting a lot of families will have their child placed in a school closer to where they work.

Dr. Brewer stated it has been very important to ensure that all of the high schools have all of the academic diploma pathways, noting it ensures that students can remain at their zoned school and still receive the same diploma.

Chairman Zalak questioned if programs such as International Baccalaureate (IB) programs impact school choice. Dr. Brewer advised that it does, which is why they are being offered at all of the high schools.

Mr. Ayers advised that since he took over the job of Student Enrollment Director with school choice it has been his goal to ensure that a student does not have to leave their neighborhood school for a quality program.

In response to Chairman Zalak, Mr. Ayers advised that the new South Marion High School will offer a Cambridge diploma program and an Aviation program.

Dr. Brewer advised that a student, regardless of whether it is an IB or Cambridge diploma, completes the diploma and have their volunteer service hours they are automatically granted an academic Bright Future Scholarship.

Councilmember James Hilty, City of Ocala, questioned if MCSB considers developments that have been approved, but not constructed. Mr. Ayers advised that the TWG did review legacy projects.

Dr. James advised that a land map can be provided to the BCC containing the MCSB

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vacant land and availability for future school sites, noting most of the land they own is in the southwest portion of the County. She stated the recent rezoning should help with balancing capacity issues.

Chairman Zalak commented on future planning of parks and sportsplexes in Marion County. He opined that there may be future opportunities for the County to pair with the Schools for these types of facilities. Chairman Zalak advised that the planning process and the Comprehensive Plan process is working to ensure the urban growth boundary (UGB) is where most of the housing, businesses and commercial development is going. This allows the County to protect the FPA and Ocala National Forest, which are what make Marion County unique and allows them to continue to be the Horse Capital of the World.

There being no further business to come before the Board, the meeting thereupon adjourned at 10:11 a.m.

Carl Zalak, III, Chairman

Attest:

Gregory C. Harrell, Clerk