

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

July 24, 2025

**CALL TO ORDER:**

The Marion County Board of County Commissioners (BCC) met in a workshop session in Commission Chambers at 9:02 a.m. on Thursday, July 24, 2025, at the Marion County Governmental Complex located in Ocala, Florida.

**INTRODUCTION OF WORKSHOP - CHAIRMAN KATHY BRYANT**

Chairman Bryant advised that the workshop was scheduled this morning to discuss the fiscal year (FY) 2025-2026 budget.

**PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE**

The meeting opened with the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag of our Country.

**ROLL CALL**

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

Chairman Bryant advised that she was able to reach Chief Probation Officer Randy Reynolds, Department of Juvenile Justice (DJJ), yesterday and their team worked diligently to provide information to County staff, noting she is unsure if there has been adequate time to disseminate that information. She commented on a DJJ portal that the County can obtain access to, view its utilization charges and request a review of charges that may not be associated with a Marion County case. Chairman Bryant advised that it is her belief the County would have to coordinate with the Clerk's Office and State Attorney's Office. She commented on having the matter addressed at a Public Safety Coordinating Council (PSCC) meeting to see if there is any way to monitor that to ensure the utilization charges are all accurate.

**OPENING REMARKS – Audrey Fowler, Budget Director**

Budget Director Audrey Fowler presented a 6 page handout entitled, "Marion County Board of County Commissioners Budget Adjustments Tentative Budget Fiscal Year 2025-26, Adjustments through July 23, 2025". She referred to the handout and advised that the document reflects the \$33,000.00 added for the turn back funds from the Tax Collector where staff substituted out recurring revenue. Ms. Fowler stated there is additional recurring revenue in the amount of \$56,885.00 relating to the Marion County School Board's Public Safety Radio costs per the cost allocation plan. She advised that she was notified by ACA Angel Roussel last night that there was going to be changes relating to the billing of labor hours for Fleet Management to help recover the salary and wages for the Non-General Fund Departments. It appears that it will amount to approximately \$80,000.00 of revenue, and 5 percent (%) of that must be held back resulting in a

July 24, 2025

\$76,000.00 increase in revenue to the General Fund. Ms. Fowler stated those 2 items added in leaves the County \$262,344.00 to find in recurring within the General Fund. She advised that the Fine and Forfeiture Fund does not change, noting there is \$1,448,912.00. There is turnback funds from the prior year that are non-recurring in the amount of \$1,405,231.00 in addition to excess non-recurring reserve in the General Fund (\$43,681.00) that can be used to make up that difference. Ms. Fowler stated she confirmed with Finance Director Jennifer Cole that the funds are eligible for transferring from the General Fund to the Fine and Forfeiture Fund if that is the direction to balance that fund.

Chairman Bryant advised that she believes that is the best option to balance that fund if the Board is not going to consider the 0.0200 millage rate adjustment. She stated while she expects the Board can set the millage rate where they want, there has to be consideration given relating to the recurring charges. Chairman Bryant advised that based on information received from the Property Appraiser yesterday, the County will not get the same increase in taxable value next year.

Ms. Fowler stated the Marion Transit bus match in the amount of \$81,679.00 was held back.

In response to Commissioner McClain, Ms. Fowler advised that if the one-time funds are applied, the millage rate in the Fine and Forfeiture Fund could be reduced to 0.8300 mills; however, the County would be looking at a \$1,800,000.00 recurring deficit the Board would have to fix next year.

Chairman Bryant commented on the time needed to review the information received last night from DJJ.

Mr. Bouyounes stated he passed the information on to Director of Internal Services Mike McCain, who was able to decipher some of that information.

In response to Chairman Bryant, Mr. Bouyounes provided an overview relating to the conversations he has had with the outside agencies.

#### **OPENING REMARKS – Barbara Robertson, Program Director, Guardian Ad Litem**

Program Director Barbara Robertson, Fifth Judicial Circuit Guardian Ad Litem Program, appeared to review the proposed FY 2025-26 budgets for Cost Center 262, Guardian Ad Litem Program (page 96) and Cost Center 263, Guardian Ad Litem Technology (page 97). She advised that there are no proposed changes to this budget.

In response to Chairman Bryant, Ms. Robertson advised that the State has provided a couple of laptops for some of the leadership positions, which has helped out this year. She stated there was a large increase last year due to the addition of staff; however, the organization is now at capacity to serve 100% of the children, noting this can account for the decrease in the proposed budget.

Ms. Robertson advised that beginning in July of last year the organization was able to take on 100% of the children in the Foster Care system, specifically in Marion County, prior to that roughly 50% were being served. She stated it was a huge undertaking, noting the organization is proud to meet that need.

It was the general consensus of the Board that there are no further questions in regard to the Guardian Ad Litem budget.

#### **OPENING REMARKS – Michael Graves, Public Defender**

Public Defender Michael Graves appeared to review the Department's proposed FY 2025-26 budget for Cost Center 200, Public Defender Administration (page 79); Cost

Center 201, Public Defender Technology (page 80); Cost Center 202, Public Defender LOV (page 81); and Cost Center 268, Early Intervention Program (page 104). He stated currently the Fifth Judicial Circuit is funded at 49% of what the State Attorney's budget is Statewide. Mr. Graves advised that the average throughout the State is 57%, noting every dollar received from the State budget requires the Department to fund 20% of that out of trust funds from fines, fees, collections, etc. He stated in the Seventh Judicial Circuit (Daytona Beach) it is only 7%. Mr. Graves advised that for every dollar other Circuits get, the Fifth Judicial Circuit loses 20 cents on the dollar due to the funding that has not kept up over the past 20 years with the growth in the Circuit, specifically in Marion and Lake Counties. He opined that the Fifth Judicial Circuit should receive the funding from the State and hopefully reduce the reliance on the County funding. Mr. Graves commented on having a criminal justice system that flows in a manner that is appropriate with due process.

In response to Chairman Bryant, Mr. Graves advised that the Trust Fund is the portion from fines, fees, etc., noting the Clerks from the 5 Counties do a fine job collecting. He stated the Fifth Judicial Circuit collects more money every month than Miami-Dade. Mr. Graves advised that if the Circuit's allocation went from 49% to 57%, it would mean the dollar amount coming from the State would be greater.

Clerk Gregory C. Harrell stated he is not sure if the percentage would necessarily change by law; however, the overall requests from the State Attorney, Public Defender and Court Administration would likely be reduced.

Mr. Graves advised that he could say without question the Public Defender's Office would be able to fund certain sources that are currently funded out of the kindness of the Board. Mr. Harrell commented on the collective negotiating power that the Florida Association of Counties (FAC) has relative to some of the other entities that come before the Board, noting there should probably be a bigger dialogue relating to lobbying more effectively in a way that pays dividends for the County. He stated all of the parties would be happy to provide the Board with the necessary data.

In response to Chairman Bryant, Mr. Graves stated he is unaware of the particular Statute; however, there are a couple of the funding Statutes that require the County to pay for technical aspects the Public Defender's Office cannot pay for.

Chairman Bryant advised that when there has previously been a collective effort, the Board has seen success. She stated it could be addressed through the Legislative process to determine if this is something the Board wished to move forward.

Mr. Graves advised that he and State Attorney Bill Gladson have discovered in their lobbying efforts that it is more meaningful when done together. He stated that with the authority and influence of the County behind them as an essential stakeholder, it can only be beneficial.

Mr. Graves stated there is an increase to the proposed budget relating to technology costs. He advised that he is required to maintain case files for a certain period of time based on type, noting for things like death penalty cases they must be kept forever. Mr. Graves opined that keeping body camera footage (possibly for 5 years) is a duplication of services, noting it is also being kept by the State Attorney's Office. He stated it is a matter of dealing with the providers to say they will be able to re-access that information in the future. Mr. Graves advised that he and Mr. Gladson are working on that now and would be amongst the first in the State to attempt to strike such an agreement.

In response to Chairman Bryant, Mr. Graves stated there is information he will have to keep separately (attorney-client privilege work product). He commented on the

July 24, 2025

monumental amount of data provided through body camera footage, noting the need to protect individual's rights while making common sense relating to budgeting and the assigned costs.

In response to Commissioner Zalak, Mr. Graves commented on Axon, which offers body-worn cameras, dashcams, software, etc., noting the Marion County Sheriff's Office (MCSO) also utilizes their services. Mr. Graves stated Axon limits the Public Defender's Office relating to that information/data. The Office is allowed a window of time to download that information and if it is deleted, it cannot be accessed again at a later date if needed. Mr. Graves clarified that the Public Defender's office does not have a contract with Axon, it is the sharing agreement with the State and law enforcement agencies where they limit the time the data can be accessed and downloaded. He advised that in those instances the State Attorney's Office has worked with them to increase the window while suggesting to the company they need to provide the access or a court order would be sought.

Chairman Bryant questioned if the State Attorney's Office is able to download the data and share it with the Public Defender. Mr. Graves advised that it is done more that way now; however, the question becomes the ability to re-access it. He commented on the need to ensure the State Attorney has the capability to share the data with the Public Defender when it is needed.

Information Technology (IT) Director Danny Armas, Fifth Judicial Circuit, advised that the Office tries to calculate how much data they will use based on prior years relating to the body cameras, noting it continuously grows. He stated it is his belief that the State Attorney does not have a contract with Axon but shares the data the provided by the Sheriff's Department. When the data is sent to the Public Defender's Office, they download a copy due to the likelihood the case will be longer than the timeframe they are allowed access to that information. Mr. Armas advised that as that occurs, the Office's storage continues to grow, and a retention policy is applied to the data.

In response to Commissioner Zalak, Mr. Armas stated the storage capacity in Marion County is about 200 terabytes, including redundancy. He advised that the device is approximately \$4,000.00 and the cost is the same for the actual drives that go inside. Mr. Armas advised that he tries to make that last as long as possible, noting it used to last 5 years instead of roughly 3 years with no relief in sight. He stated the office utilizes a hybrid approach with local and cloud storage depending on the data. When items need to be shared with clients to view, individuals are provided a cloud access to prevent the need for burning a disk or thumb drive. Mr. Armas commented on the hybrid approach, noting as the videos become larger it is more difficult to play them from the cloud. He advised that cellular dumps (when law enforcement requests data from a cell phone carrier for a specific cell tower during a certain time), do not work in the Cloud and must be local. Mr. Armas stated this occurs during the discovery portion when the cellphone and other evidence is first obtained. He clarified that they are also getting some of the investigative work as well in their copy from the State Attorney.

Mr. Graves commented on the requirement throughout the Circuit to move to an updated version of its case management system, which is also the artificial intelligence (AI) for review of this data. What is known as Stack 2 will no longer be supported by the provider and along with most Public Defender/State Attorney Offices they will be moving to Stack 3 and will receive a savings due to the current business relationship with the provider as well as agreeing to be the test Circuit for the new version.

Mr. Graves advised of additional savings of \$9,000.00 to \$10,000.00, noting the Office found additional relief in shared services.

Chairman Bryant stated there will be additional conversations relating to the cost allocation or revenue received from the State. She commented on the possibility of making this a Legislative priority and bringing FAC on board along with the Public Defender and State Attorney's offices to make a difference in next year's budget.

Mr. Graves stated his office is more than happy to gather any necessary information regarding the DJJ issues.

Mr. Graves stated he spoke to State Attorney Gladson yesterday to share ideas relating to what the issue may be in regard to DJJ. He advised that everything is compressed in the juvenile justice system, noting if a juvenile is held in detention the office has 21 days to get the case to trial. If the child is committed, the law requires they be held in the detention center until they get a bed in the commitment program. Mr. Graves advised that this process takes twice as much time to get individuals placed in a program due to a lack of bed space. He stated a couple of years ago the judge could release individuals to their parents (if appropriate) on ankle monitor release; however, that law was changed. Mr. Graves advised that the judge is now required to put them in the juvenile detention center awaiting placement. This is another unfunded mandate.

Chairman Bryant questioned when the law changed. Mr. Graves stated the change occurred 2 to 3 years ago. He advised that the types of crimes being committed by juveniles is driving some of this as well as public safety. Mr. Graves stated there are things that cannot be done like ordering the release of a child if they have been committed.

Chairman Bryant questioned if this lines up with when the Board began seeing an uptick. Ms. Fowler advised that it does, noting last year there was \$50,000.00 over the prior year per month, and the year before that there was a similar uptick, which is why she predicted roughly the same amount.

Chairman Bryant commented the uptick in the number of juveniles being held rather than released causing the bed space issue, which has led to holding individuals longer from time of commitment to placement due to the lack of space.

Mr. Graves stated it is a good analysis and it is even worse with girls due to fewer programs.

In response to Commissioner Zalak, Mr. Graves advised that when dealing with the moderate, high risk and maximum risk (basically juvenile prison) where individuals are held until jurisdiction runs out, they are located throughout the State, but there are not enough.

Commissioner Zalak stated Marion County's numbers are as much as Broward County and higher than Orange County. He stated there are 22,000 days of incarceration at DJJ for approximately 60 to 70 juveniles.

In response to Commissioner Zalak, Mr. Graves advised that there are various Circuits (usually south of Lake Okeechobee) where the discretion of the Court is to release juveniles without regard to what the criminal offense is and giving very little credence to the risk assessment. In certain Counties the Courts/judges have to have clear and convincing reasons to not abide by the risk assessment and the err on the side of placing the individual in detention. He stated it differs from County to County in the Circuit, noting more individuals are sent to prison out of the Fifth Judicial Circuit than Maimi-Dade every month. Mr. Graves advised that he has his staff working to determine which types of cases are causing juveniles to be committed.

Commissioner Zalak stated some of the juveniles are a risk to themselves, family and the public and need to be incarcerated. He advised that if they can be in a program that is made for them, hopefully there can be some recovery.

July 24, 2025

Mr. Graves stated individuals are not getting the services until they get into a program and in some cases the jurisdiction of the Court is limited. He commented on individuals that are sitting in juvenile detention for 2 months waiting to be sent to a program and the jurisdiction of the court runs out so the individual cannot be sent to the program anyway. He advised that this part of the system is broken and there are limited resources to address it locally. Mr. Graves opined that it needs to be addressed and fixed at the State level.

Chairman Bryant opined that the matter can be taken up at the PSCC meeting, noting it provides an opportunity for the stakeholders to get together and discuss these issues. She stated any procedural things that can be identified and have something done about, she is confident it can be done through that Council. Legislatively, there might need to be conversations with the State relating to funding when it comes to juveniles.

It was the general consensus of the Board that there are no more questions in regard to the Public Defender's Office budget.

#### **OPENING REMARKS – Mark Lander, Administrator**

Administrator Mark Lander, Department of Health (DOH) in Marion County, appeared to review the proposed FY 2025-26 budget for Cost Center 130, Marion County Health Unit (page 281). Also present was Business Manager Kailee Sanchez. He provided a brief overview of the DOH in Marion County and the services offered to citizens. Mr. Lander stated the Department served over 66,000 clients last year, providing almost 265,000 services to those clients, which is an approximate 20% increase from the previous year. Mr. Lander advised that the Department has a sliding fee scale with a base set at zero. He commented on the 3D mobile mammograms events held at the Mary Sue Rich Community Center, noting 36 individuals were screened bringing the 3 event total to 120 women screened. Mr. Lander stated the Department has had a mobile bus for years and has been able to add a second unit due to the high demand. He advised that there have been 1 day events the Department has missed out on due to a lack of availability, which has changed with the addition of the smaller second unit. Mr. Lander commented on the health screenings that are now performed with the mobile units, noting previously the unit provided a lot of immunizations. He stated last year there were almost 1,300 services off the bus: 360 were diabetic screenings and of those 88 individuals were identified as pre-diabetic or diabetic.

Mr. Lander advised that the new unit has the ability to perform dental services. He stated services are being expanded at the current facility located in Belleview, noting he hopes construction on the new facility will begin in the next year or two. The dental services are being expanded as well. Mr. Lander advised of a gap in dental care relating to individuals with developmental disabilities, noting DOH doctors have worked with University of Florida (UF) Dentistry to try to accommodate more screenings in addition to working with AdventHealth on a hospital based dentistry program. He commented on efforts involving the Marion County Hospital District (MCHD) to work with some of their clients to provide services. Mr. Lander stated the Department is in the process of hiring another dentist for that unit.

Mr. Lander commented on the Onsite Sewage Treatment and Disposal System (OSTDS) program that has transitioned to the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP). He advised that he is unsure how it will look in the future, noting their Phase 2 transfer did not occur. Mr. Lander stated DEP was supposed to take 23 to 27 Counties in Phase 2. Marion County was Phase 1; however, DEP did not get the funding for the positions. He

advised of a meeting on August 6, 2025, to discuss whether they will move forward with the transition as Legislatively required or if they are considering giving back the 17 Counties, which nobody wants. Mr. Lander opined that DEP has found out how difficult it is to manage a program that is really more conveniently set at the local level. He stated after the loss of that program the Department has additional space availability and DOH-Marion completed building enhancements including bringing on an area for a water testing laboratory. There are very few Health Departments in the State that have those programs anymore. Mr. Lander stated it is his preference to perform this work in-house rather than sending samples to a private lab. He commented on the benefits of the in-house labs, specifically when there is flooding. Mr. Lander advised that he reviewed the space this morning that the laboratory will be moved to and hopes to be up and running in the next 2 to 3 months. He addressed last year's building enhancements including work on the Environmental Health Office space and creating a centralized lab rather than performing blood draws in the different exam rooms.

Mr. Lander provided a brief overview of some of the Department's highlights including Lieutenant Governor Jeanette Nunez visiting the Florida Aquatics Swimming and Training (FAST) facility relating to the Florida Swimming Lesson Voucher Program, noting this event was the Statewide kickoff for the program. He commented on a Legislative allocation of roughly \$500,000.00 that was Statewide, noting Marion County received a little over \$15,000.00. Mr. Lander advised that the Department added funds to create more vouchers for a total of 90; however, there are more than 300 applications. He stated the needs were not met last year but the Department intends to meet them this year under the leadership of Governor Ron DeSantis. Mr. Lander advised that the Governor made sure there was \$1,000,000.00 authorized Statewide this year and he anticipates Marion County's allocation will double. He stated they are prepared to provide more County funding to ensure children aged 0 to 4 are able to attend swimming lessons at FAST.

Mr. Lander addressed Project Public Health Ready (PPHR), noting Marion County received national recognition for its readiness to respond to emergencies at the local level. He advised that this is a community award that takes into consideration the Department's relationship with its partners such as the County and local Emergency Management (EM). Mr. Lander stated there are approximately 500 to 560 communities nationwide with that recognition. He commented on the County's Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program, noting they were selected to highlight a Statewide program with artificial intelligence (AI) that has since been rolled out across Florida. The program reduces time staff would typically spend on phones by utilizing AI, which allows staff to spend more time with clients.

Mr. Lander advised that the Department continues support for neighboring Counties; 1) IT support and purchasing for Citrus County; 2) environmental health supervision and Public Information Officer (PIO) duties for Putnam County; and 3) the WIC program in Sumter County.

Mr. Lander referred to a chart containing projected expenses relating to the 2025-26 County funding request as seen on the overhead screens.

Commissioner Curry requested an update relating to the DEP septic tank permitting operation. Mr. Lander stated this started in 2020 through Legislation and beginning in 2021 there is a 5 year Interagency Agreement (IAA) that expires June 30, 2026 for the entire State. Seventeen Counties were identified for Phase 1, so they took the panhandle and wanted a larger County, so they were given Marion County. He advised that he has received mixed results from those other Counties; however, it is too soon to provide an

July 24, 2025

update relating to Marion County. Mr. Lander stated Marion County was last to roll out in Phase 1, and that occurred on June 30, 2025. He advised that he has not received complaints from anyone thus far. Mr. Lander clarified that the same individuals are performing the work, they just have a different business card under DEP.

**OPENING REMARKS - Beth McCall, Executive Director, Marion County Children's Alliance**

Executive Director Beth McCall, Marion County Children's Alliance, appeared to review the Department's proposed FY 2025-26 budget for Cost Center 136, Marion County Children's Alliance (page 43). She presented a 4 page handout entitled, "2024 Impact Report". Ms. McCall stated the request for funding has not changed. She commented on 2 issues for prevention that the agency has been working on including vaping, noting the Students Against Destructive Decisions (SADD) clubs will be focused a little bit on that initiative. Ms. McCall commented on the mental health of children relating to social media and screen time and advised that there is a campaign and individuals will be hearing more about an initiative from the Children's Alliance and many other organizations in Marion County.

Ms. McCall stated the crimes perpetrated by teens are more violent; however, their mentoring program, which is grant funding through DJJ, is one of the models in the State. The agency's 5 year grant came to an end, but they were refunded and are working with elementary, middle and some high school students who have been identified with risk factors. She advised that the mentors are paid and there is a lot of accountability and the agency is seeing good results from the younger children. Ms. McCall stated she hopes as the agency moves through this process there will be improvement regarding some of the crimes students are committing.

Chairman Bryant expressed appreciation for the work Ms. McCall and the Children's Alliance performs. She stated she is interested in hearing more about the social media endeavor.

Ms. McCall advised that the campaign is called Look Up Marion: Put Down the Phone Day and will be a 1 day event to be held on November 15, 2025.

It was the general consensus of the Board that there are no further questions in regard to the Marion County Children's Alliance budget.

**OPENING REMARKS – Carri Theall, Early Learning Coalition**

Board Chair Todd Panzer, Early Learning Coalition (ELC), appeared to review the proposed FY 2025-26 budget for Cost Center 137, Early Learning Coalition (page 45). He advised that Ms. Theall is not present due to a prior commitment. Also present were Chief Executive Officer (CEO) LaTrisha Sims and Chief Programs Officer Elizabeth Deola. He presented a folder containing a Dolly Parton Imagination Library (DPIL) bookmark, 1 page handout entitled, "Dolly Parton's Imagination Library Fact Sheet 2025"; a 1 page handout entitled, "School Readiness Program Fact Sheet 2025"; and a Countdown to Kindergarten Family Activities Calendar.

Mr. Panzer stated this year's request is the same as last year \$150,000.00 for school readiness and \$50,000.00 for the DPIL.

Chairman Bryant stated the Board loves what the DPIL has done; however, the additional \$25,000.00 was supposed to be a 1 time request.

Mr. Panzer expressed appreciation towards the Board, noting their unwavering support relating to school readiness. He commented on the State requirement for local in kind



matching, which the Board has provided. Mr. Panzer addressed the DPIL funding request, noting the Coalition's \$1,000,000.00 budget shortfall this year. The direct child care costs have increased due to the requirement for the Coalition to pick up the parent co-pay portion and sibling co-pay portions completely. He advised that the Coalition has to find those funds, noting it is a Legislative pathway due to being direct child care dollars. Mr. Panzer stated the support he requested is due to reaching 34% of the eligible children in the community already, providing them with free books from the DPIL. The Coalition helps to get parents working by providing child care, school readiness helps to get children ready for public school pathways and offers a Voluntary Prekindergarten Education Program (VPK).

Commissioner McClain requested information relating to other efforts the ELC Board is undertaking to find other funding for the DPIL and where the funds go regarding that program. Mr. Panzer stated the ELC Board is constantly looking for grants and has become a member of the Community Foundation; however, grants are few and far between preventing the Board from securing additional funding despite their diligent work. He advised that the ELC's mandate is dollar in, dollar out, noting they exceed the State mandates by a large percentage margin over most of their peer throughout the State. The Coalition was one of the ELC's with the least budget loss this year likely due to the how efficient the ELC is with the funds they are provided.

Commissioner McClain advised that he was under the impression last year that the Board was going to provide the \$150,000.00 for the match, \$25,000.00 for the DPIL and the additional \$25,000.00 would be a 1 time request. He stated he is okay with the \$150,000.00 and the \$25,000.00 for the DPIL, noting the funding can be reviewed on a year-by-year basis. Commissioner McClain advised that the Board will continue to work with the ELC to try to find other ways to raise funds for the DPIL.

It was the general consensus of the Board that the funding for the DPIL will be reduced to a total of \$25,000.00 this year and the school readiness funding will remain at \$150,000.00.

Commissioner Stone encouraged the ELC to find 24 more people to provide \$1,000.00 each to reach the \$225,000.00, noting she will be in touch.

It was the general consensus of the Board that there are no further questions in regard to the ELC budget.

#### **OPENING REMARKS – Jennifer Martinez, Director, Marion Senior Services/Transit**

Executive Director Jennifer Martinez, Marion Senior Services/Transit, appeared to review the Department's proposed FY 2025-26 budget for Cost Center, 138, Marion Senior Services/Transit (page 45). Also present was Transit Director Clayton Murch.

Executive Director Jennifer Martinez, Marion Senior Services/Transit, advised that her organization has the largest increase this year, due to a 114% increase in insurance costs for transit. She stated some of the litigations were the organization's fault and some were not, noting regardless of who is at fault it still works against Marion Senior Services/Transit. Ms. Martinez advised that transit is the largest liability, so the organization went out to bid for insurance and received an extension on their policy to allow for additional time for one more bid, which came in cheaper. That bid was still over \$1,000,000.00 and is the reason for the significant increase.

In response to Chairman Bryant, Ms. Martinez stated there are things that can be cut from the budget request.

July 24, 2025

Transit Director Clayton Murch advised that relating to insurance, there were quotes up to \$1,700,000.00, noting Marion Transit had to reduce its coverage to get to the amount of \$1,000,050.00. He stated the increase from \$490,000.00 to \$1,000,050.00 is a big hit. The insurance renewal occurs in March and the organization's grant submission is due to the Federal Government on January 10, which prevented them from putting everything in that request. He advised that Marion Transit had 15 buses but has held off on the last 5 due to significant quality issues that have resulted in the vehicles being back and forth to the dealership as much as they have been on the road. Mr. Murch opined that Marion Transit is in a good place if they need to eliminate the match for the buses in the amount of \$81,679.00. He stated the buses that they would be replacing are spares, utilized when something breaks down.

In response to Chairman Bryant, Mr. Murch advised that the \$81,679.00 is the 10% match for the 5 buses. He stated there is a long lead time for chassis and bus completion, noting normally it is 6 to 8 months.

Ms. Martinez advised that the organization has not received their federal dollars back and if those funds came back at a lower rate it would reduce the County's match.

In response to Chairman Bryant, Mr. Murch stated he does expect to have the federal match by September, noting the organization was informed that the match will be here by August. He clarified that there is no indication that the allocation will be less.

Ms. Martinez stated the organization would not change its request to the Board if the allocation were more.

In response to Commissioner Stone, Mr. Murch advised that the \$81,679.00 can be removed from the Marion Senior Services/Transit budget request.

Chairman Bryant stated it is her belief the Board will be able to set the maximum millage rate where they want it this afternoon. She advised that there is more work to be done between now and September and there will likely be a need for additional conversation.

Commissioner Zalak questioned whether the Board has always been fully responsible for the insurance or has it mostly been covered by the federal government. Mr. Murch stated they can get it covered by the federal government, but the timing this year is the issue. He advised that the organization has already submitted an amended request, but it is not yet approved.

In response to Commissioner Zalak, Ms. Martinez stated utilizing the organization's Reserves would wipe them out entirely.

Chairman Bryant questioned if they would have the answer to the amended request by August as well. Mr. Murch indicated he will have the response.

Ms. Martinez advised that she would be happy to keep the Board in the loop, noting she had a great discussion with Mr. Bouyounes and has kept Ms. Fowler updated all along.

Mr. Murch stated every 2 years, the organization sends drivers through an in-house defensive driving program through the Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT). He advised of ride along/ride withs, and commentary drives akin to the Smith System, noting they have decreased their accident rate and severity. Mr. Murch advised of a pending claim of more than \$800,000.00 that is questionable, noting he hopes to have it resolved. He stated given the insurance rates this year, he fully expects to start seeing decreases as some of the older incidents fall out of the 3 and 5 year windows that the insurance industry considers when rating a system.

Commissioner Curry advised that this is an industry wide issue with commercial vehicular insurance in Florida. He stated an individual can have a perfect claims history and still see their premium go up 25%. Commissioner Curry opined that the company Marion

Transit has moved to do a much better job defending claims. He stated if the organization went to a \$25,000.00 deductible on liability with this company, they would have to post a \$125,000.00 security deposit. There is a much higher liability relating to transporting people.

It was the general consensus of the Board that there are no further questions in regard to the Marion Senior Services/Transit budget.

**OPENING REMARKS – Richard Cardinali, President, Historical Commission**

President Dr. Richard Cardinali, Historical Commission, appeared to review the proposed FY 2025-26 budget for Cost Center 145, Historical Commission (page 47). He stated the Historical Commission lives within its means, noting most of the funds are returned. He commented on long-range projects such as markers, noting there is one in Tallahassee now that has been there for roughly 2 to 3 weeks. Once the Commission receives the okay, the marker goes to a private company, which takes approximately 6 months. Commissioner Zalak out at 10:25 a.m.

It was the general consensus of the Board that there are no further questions in regard to the Historical Commission.

**OPENING REMARKS – Vivi Serena, Chairman, Marion Soil Conservation District**

Vice-Chairman Justin Albright, Marion Soil and Water Conservation District, appeared to review the Department's proposed FY 2025-26 budget for Cost Center 147, Marion Soil Conservation District (page 49). He presented a 6 page handout entitled, "A Year In Review 2024-2025"; and a 2 page handout containing talking points. Mr. Albright commented on changes over the past couple of years in relation to Special Districts, noting there have been several House Bills (HB) and Senate Bills (SB) that have resulted in additional requirements. Many of the Special Districts have been or are going to be eliminated over the next couple of years. He stated over the past 10 years that he has been involved, the District has provided cost-share dollars to local farmers through the coordination of funds from Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (FDACS) and has been successful bringing in roughly \$400,000.00 to \$650,000.00 in cost-share programs. Mr. Albright advised that as many of the other Districts are going away, Marion County seems to be a District that is not. He stated the State has put additional requirements on the District including hiring the employee from last year, taking on some of the membership and dues requirements, and some further educational requirements for employees, resulting in a small increase to the proposed budget. Mr. Albright advised that in addition to making sure the District continues to have the cost-share programs and funding going to local farmers, the USDA Office is not going to be there anymore. The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), which is housed in the USDA Office and also provides cost-share programs somewhere in the amount of \$800,000.00 into Marion County was slated to be moved to Gainesville. The District offered/negotiated to get some office space in the Growth Services Office where they are located and were successful. He stated the NRCS Official will stay in Marion County. Mr. Albright commented on bringing down the cost of printing, noting the District is using its own computers for most things. They have spoken to Growth Services relating to utilizing their printers and allocating the costs down.

In response to Chairman Bryant, Mr. Albright stated a lot of the increase in Travel and Per Diem can be attributed to education programs and compliance for the District's employees to go to certain meetings and obtain additional education to keep up with State

July 24, 2025

requirements. He advised that the District has received a lot of that back from FDACS or other outside entities; however, that is no longer happening. Mr. Albright stated the he believes the District can cut back and eliminate the \$4,000.00 increase in Printing and Binding. He commented on the \$1,500.00 increase in Training and Education, noting they are no longer being reimbursed by FDACS. Mr. Albright advised that the increase in Computer Software may be associated with their payroll system but is confident it can be addressed.

Commissioner Zalak returned at 10:31 a.m.

Chairman Bryant questioned the increase in Dues and Memberships. Mr. Albright stated nearly all of the Travel and Per Diem, Dues and Memberships and Training and Education were being reimbursed by FDACS.

Chairman Bryant questioned if there is an opportunity to do any of the training remotely. Mr. Albright stated there may be, noting most are in-person trainings with some being conducted remotely. He advised that the District has maintained integrity with the State relating to ensuring the funds come to the County, noting agencies in other Counties have become more political and some have dried up completely regarding cost-share. Mr. Albright stated he is hopeful some of the additional funds will come to Marion County in cost-share programs.

In response to Chairman Bryant, Mr. Albright stated the District brought just over \$400,000.00 back into Marion County, noting they share meetings with NRCS who is providing over \$700,000.00 in cost-share programs that were going to leave the County. He advised that the previous year the County received close to \$600,000.00 in cost-share. The amount fluctuates from year to year.

It was the general consensus of the Board that there are no further questions in regard to the Marion Soil Conservation District budget.

#### **OPENING REMARKS – Dr. Phillip Geist, Area Director, Small Business Development Council**

Area Director Dr. Philip Geist, Florida Small Business Development Council (SBDC), at the University of North Florida (UNF), appeared to review the Department's proposed FY 2025-26 budget for Cost Center 151, Small Business Development Council (page 52).

Dr. Geist advised that last year's funding was \$116,000.00. He stated if the Board has to keep the funding request flat this year, by adding an adjustment of \$4,000.00 for inflation the budget will truly remain level. Dr. Geist advised that the reason he is requesting \$60,000.00 more is that over the last 4 years the number of individuals coming in for service has nearly doubled. He stated the Council has handled the increase, noting he has contributed more hours. Dr. Geist advised that the rest has been handled by having consultants elsewhere in the system work virtually with those clients. He stated there are a number of small manufactures, agricultural businesses and things of that sort where they need to see and work in the business with the individual if you are going to truly help them with what they need (process improvement, developing an inventory management system, etc.). Dr. Geist advised that the additional \$64,000.00 he is requesting would allow the Council to bring another body into Marion County, noting they receive a 3 to 1 match from the Federal and State dollars. He stated while the Council is a cost to the Board, it is also an investment due to each of the businesses they work with is paying taxes and has employees. Dr. Geist advised that if the Board fell somewhere in the middle relating to funding, the Council would bring in a part-time person.

Commissioner Curry stated Dr. Geist's presentation during his one-on-one was very

impressive, noting he is in favor of the increase. He advised that the Council is increasing the tax base and employment opportunities.

Dr. Geist stated the Council is not allowed to report numbers that business report directly to them, they can only report numbers captured on a survey that is sent out by a third-party contracted through the Small Business Administration (SBA) system. The survey has a return of roughly 20%. He advised that the businesses the Council worked with last year had 496 employees. Dr. Geist stated there were 88 jobs created and the remainder were jobs retained, noting due to the assistance the Council provided those businesses did not have to lay off individuals. There was a little more than \$2,000,000.00 in Capital investment reported in the County and sales increases of roughly \$2,000,000.00. He advised that the actual number relating to sales will be higher due to the survey and the hesitancy individuals have regarding reporting what they are earning in sales.

Commissioner Zalak stated he does not feel like the County has all the positions it needs yet; however, if they are able to add those plus provide the extra funding Dr. Geist requested he would be in favor.

Ms. Fowler advised that right now there is enough recurring revenue to take it to 3.3600 mills, there is \$233,344.00 from 3.3500 mills and adequate non-recurring to cover that. She stated she would not have any concerns about doing that, noting it is the Board's choice.

Chairman Bryant advised that the Board is within the bounds needed to keep the millage rate flat at the public hearing at 1:30 p.m. today. Ms. Fowler concurred, noting the Board can use a little of the non-recurring revenue and will still have over \$1,000,000.00 available for incidental expenses during the year and balance this fund to the 3.3500 mills. Chairman Bryant stated for now the request will remain as is. She advised that she cannot guarantee it will stay that way as the Board continues to work on the budget through September.

It was the general consensus of the Board that the Council will receive the flat funding and the \$4,000.00 for inflation at the very least and there will be more discussion relating to funding the other position.

Chairman Bryant expressed appreciation towards Dr. Geist for his work.

In response to Chairman Bryant, Dr. Geist stated he has been doing this for over 30 years and it is time to think about retiring, but not quite yet.

It was the general consensus of the Board that there are no further questions in regard to the SBDC budget.

#### **BOARD DISCUSSION AND CLOSING COMMENTS:**

Chairman Bryant advised that the Board is at the point that they know what they will be doing going onto this afternoon's public hearing. She cautioned everyone that while they are able to reach the desired the millage rate, it is necessary to think about next year and the recurring costs relating to salaries.

Chairman Bryant stated over the past 5 years there have been a lot of reclassifications, and increases relating to salary studies. She commented on reducing the amount budgeted for salary increases from 5% to 4%, noting it would result in \$1,000,000.00 in recurring revenue. Chairman Bryant advised that she is trying to think of ways to mitigate the County's recurring revenue that increases every year. She opined that it is probably better for employees to have that income from the beginning.

Commissioner Zalak stated the average is less than 4% and it is about rewarding individuals who are top performers.

July 24, 2025

Chairman Bryant questioned if the Board would rather set aside 5% or reduce that to 4%. Commissioner Zalak advised that the Board should go back and look at what the Consumer Price Index (CPI) is and discuss what a real cost of living increase (COLA) looks like. He stated if the Board was doing that this year, it would be spending just under 3% relating to the CPI with the inflationary number. Commissioner Zalak stated if everybody is doing their job and showing up they will get the 3%, noting the only thing being rewarded with the extra 2% is absolute top performers. He opined that it is still a good process. Commissioner Zalak commented on the increase relating to team costs, noting competition with the private sector has contributed. He advised that all those things should be addressed, but that should occur in January during the workshop. Ms. Fowler can provide a projection relating to the CPI at that time.

Chairman Bryant stated the Board has not set anything yet.

Ms. Fowler advised that the 1% was across all the funds for the BCC, so \$469,000.00 of that was General Fund with the remainder coming from all of the Special Revenue Funds and Enterprise Funds. She stated when Sheriff William "Billy" Woods, Marion County Sheriff's Office (MCSO) was in here yesterday, he had a 4% in his budget already so it would not affect the General Fund.

In response to Commissioner Zalak, Ms. Fowler stated there would not be a reduction of \$1,000,000.00 in the General Fund. It would be approximately \$500,000.00.

In response to Chairman Bryant, Mr. Bouyounes stated all of the Constitutional Officers noted they are giving 5% except the Sheriff. He advised that this information was included in the documents provided to the Board this morning.

Mr. Bouyounes questioned whether the Board wants to review the information this afternoon. Chairman Bryant stated they can be discussed between now and September, noting the Board knows they have reduced enough to get to the flat millage rate at this afternoon's public hearing. She opined that the Board should go back to having Departments submit to Mr. Bouyounes what their requests will be as far as everything else is concerned and then look and see what is left prior to determining what is available in order to give raises.

Chairman Bryant advised that she believes the County has caught up and has wonderful employees who are well compensated.

Commissioner Zalak stated where there is a problem here or there, the Board will take care of that position. He advised that there is a contract coming up in 2026 and there will be unique challenges. Commissioner Zalak stated employees need to know the growth within the community is slowing.

Ms. Fowler advised that the County is seeing the percentage of increase come down year over year (YOY). She stated that the millage for the Fine and Forfeiture Fund is at 0.8700 of a mill and the County may have the non-recurring revenue to transfer over; however, the Board will probably need to increase that millage either this year or next year in order to make it where its recurring revenues are supporting the fund. Ms. Fowler advised that both the General Fund and the Fine and Forfeiture Fund are Countywide Funds so the Board could shift millage from the General Fund to the Fine and Forfeiture Fund and end up with the same total Countywide millage. She stated she would definitely leave the maximum millage at 0.8700 of a mill until there is more discussion.

Commissioner Zalak advised that he is not willing to leave the millage at 0.8700 of a mill. Chairman Bryant questioned if the funds for DJJ have to come out of the Fine and Forfeiture Fund or can it come out of the General Fund.

Mr. Bouyounes stated it used to be in the General Fund.

Ms. Fowler advised that it was moved over to this fund because there was more revenue source.

Commissioner Stone stated she remembers that a lot of things were moved to Fine and Forfeiture to shore it up. She advised that the Board saw it go up a lot due to that action several years ago.

Chairman Bryant stated the Board was trying to have the fund for law enforcement that completely covers law enforcement, which is why they moved all of that into Fine and Forfeiture. She opined that if the Board moved the DJJ costs and it truly reflects the Sheriff's budget and the Board can make the shift to have the DJJ in the General Fund it is more appropriate.

Ms. Fowler commented on taxable value, noting the Board will get more recurring revenue in the Fine and Forfeiture Fund YOY as a percentage of growth than in the General Fund. She stated this is due to property tax making up just 45% of the revenue, whereas, in the Fine and Forfeiture Fund it is 90% of the revenue. Ms. Fowler advised that long-term the Fine and Forfeiture Fund will have more capacity to fund the increases that are going to come if they have a 5% increase YOY.

Chairman Bryant questioned what an 8% percent increase looks like in taxable value just in the General Fund. Ms. Fowler stated there would be an approximate 4% increase in recurring revenue, noting it is only 45% to 50% of the revenue and the remainder of the revenues are only growing at 1% to 2%. She advised that the County would end up getting about half.

Chairman Bryant questioned if the Board is walking into deficit next year. Ms. Fowler stated this year there was 5.7% and the recurring revenues with the increases the County has funded the recurring operational increases with recurring revenue increases. Next year that recurring operational growth is going to be less. Ms. Fowler advised that everyone needs to plan on a YOY increase that is closer to 4%. She stated it is unknown what the State Legislature will do next year with State shared revenue and Sales Tax, noting they did not get all of the cuts they wanted this year. Ms. Fowler advised that this could impact the County if there are additional exemptions or a reduced rate next year.

Commissioner Zalak stated property taxes will be on the ballot.

Clerk Harrell clarified that the discussion relates to less of an increase not a decrease. He advised that the Board is making decisions this year of a recurring nature for a budget that will still be bigger next year to address what is being decided now. It is a question of how much can be added on next year.

Commissioner Stone commented on the Board making good choices this year and next year.

Ms. Fowler stated the reason for looking at the Fine and Forfeiture Fund is due to that one being in a recurring deficit this year.

Chairman Bryant commented on serving as a Board member when the County had revenues going down, noting she has had to make hard decisions. She advised of the difficulty associated with laying off individuals. Chairman Bryant stated when the Board continues to add to recurring costs and the recurring revenue starts going down those things will eventually meet and the County will have a problem.

Commissioner Stone advised that the Board has to make good decisions when they get there; however, they also have to serve the public today.

Chairman Bryant stated the County is very capable of serving the public the way the County is operating today.

July 24, 2025

There being no further business to come before the Board, the meeting thereupon adjourned at 11:03 a.m.

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Kathy Bryant, Chairman

Attest:

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Gregory C. Harrell, Clerk

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