

Liberty County, FL

Liberty County Board of County Commissioners - Workshop

Minutes

Tuesday, June 16, 2026 at 5:00 pm

**AGENDAS ARE POSTED ON THE BOARD'S WEBSITE AT
WWW.LIBERTYCOUNTYFL.ORG; ATTACHMENTS ARE PROVIDED TO THE
BOARD MEMBERS ONLY AND ARE AVAILABLE TO THE PUBLIC UPON
REQUEST.**

Meeting Location

Meeting to start at 5:00 PM at the Bristol Boat Ramp, then move to the Liberty County Courthouse after the boat ramp walkthrough concludes.

* Meeting at the boat ramp was canceled due to the weather; the meeting just took place at the courthouse.

1. Call to Order

Minutes:

- Chairman Branch called the meeting to order in person at 5:07 EST. Present at the meeting are Chairman Branch, Vice Chairman Brown, Commissioner Johnson, Commissioner Arnold, Clerk Ford, and Deputy Clerk DeLoach.

2. Invocation

Minutes:

- Invocation led by County Attorney Hosford.

3. Pledge of Allegiance

Minutes:

- Mr. Dale Hobby led the Pledge of Allegiance.

4. Audience Concerns

Minutes:

- No audience concerns.

Discussion Items

5. Boat Ramp Walkthrough

Minutes:

- The Board reviewed the proposed boat ramp improvements and discussed

potential modifications before final design and construction. Representatives explained that the project has received CDBG-DR funding, but environmental review and permitting updates still need to be completed, leaving several months available to make adjustments to the design if desired.

- The proposed project would significantly widen the existing boat ramp from approximately 32 feet to 62.5 feet between sheet pile walls. After accounting for the proposed gangway and floating dock, approximately 52 feet of usable ramp width would remain. Discussion centered on whether the ramp should be divided into two or three launching lanes, with several attendees favoring two wider lanes separated by a mountable curb or divider to improve traffic flow and safety.
- Dewberry Engineers explained that sheet pile walls on both sides of the ramp are necessary to push back the existing slopes and create enough space for the widening project. The walls would also help reduce erosion and prevent sediment from washing onto the ramp. However, they noted that periodic maintenance dredging or sediment removal will still be necessary due to the natural accumulation of sand caused by river currents.
- A lengthy discussion focused on the location and design of the floating dock system. Concerns were raised about placing the dock in the center of the ramp because boaters may tie off their vessels and block launching lanes. Several participants suggested locating the dock along the outside edge of the ramp and providing additional walkway space for temporary boat tie-offs. Engineers indicated the dock layout could still be modified and extended if funding allows.
- The Dewberry team reviewed the proposed ADA improvements, including an ADA parking space and accessible sidewalk connection to the dock access area. While the approach to the ramp would meet ADA standards, the boat ramp itself is exempt from ADA slope requirements due to its function and steep grade.
- Engineers also described a specialized floating gangway system developed to accommodate the Apalachicola River's fluctuating water levels. The articulated dock sections would rest on legs during low water conditions and float as water levels rise, maintaining access to the floating dock throughout most river conditions. Additional ideas were discussed, including protective bumpers and tie-off areas along portions of the dock system.
- The group discussed sediment buildup at the downstream side of the ramp, which currently creates navigation challenges during low water conditions. Engineers explained that widening the ramp and installing sheet pile walls would improve access, but natural sedimentation would continue to occur and require maintenance.
- Funding availability was a major topic of discussion. While the current grant provides funding for portions of the project, it may not cover all proposed improvements. Engineers recommended bidding the entire project first and then determining which components can be completed based on actual construction costs. Several participants noted that current construction market conditions may result in favorable bids due to contractors seeking work.
- The Board and project team discussed project priorities, should funding be insufficient. The primary decision would likely be between completing the ramp widening and sheet pile wall construction or constructing the floating dock

system. Several Board members expressed the opinion that widening the ramp and completing the downstream sheet pile wall should be prioritized first, with floating dock improvements added later if additional grant funding becomes available.

- Additional discussion included drainage improvements, landscaping, solar lighting, shoreline stabilization, ramp end protection, and the possibility of creating viewing or gathering areas near the top of the sheet pile walls.
- The project team reported that another grant application seeking approximately \$1 million in additional funding is currently under review. A decision is expected later in the summer. If awarded, the additional funding could allow the County to complete substantially more of the planned improvements.

6. Draft Ordinance 2026-04 - Solar

Minutes:

- The Board reviewed and discusses Draft Ordinance 2026-04, which would establish regulations for utility-scale solar energy facilities and battery energy storage systems in Liberty County. County Attorney Ken Hosford presented the draft ordinance and explained that its purpose is to protect the county's rural character, agricultural and silvicultural lands, environmental resources, roadway infrastructure, and adjacent property owners while allowing the Board to regulate future solar development through the conditional use process.
- Mr. Hosford explained that recent state legislation has created a policy framework that favors regulation of solar facilities rather than outright prohibition. While utility-scale solar facilities are not automatically permitted on agricultural land, counties are expected to adopt reasonable regulations rather than outright bans. He emphasized that the ordinance is intended to give Liberty County a strong regulatory position should future solar projects be proposed.
- The discussion reviewed the ordinance's findings and purpose, which recognize the importance of private property rights, reliable electrical generation, agricultural and forestry operations, environmental protection, wildlife habitat preservation, and maintaining the county's rural character. The draft ordinance would require utility-scale solar facilities to obtain conditional use approval and comply with extensive development standards.
- Board members reviewed definitions included in the ordinance, including utility-scale solar facilities, battery energy storage systems, and agricultural accessory solar systems. The ordinance is intended to apply only to large commercial facilities that exceed 20 acres or generate more than 2 megawatts of power. It would not affect residential rooftop solar installations or agricultural accessory solar systems used to support farm operations.
- A significant portion of the discussion focused on proposed development standards, including setbacks, buffers, screening requirements, noise limitations, stormwater management, environmental protections, wildlife corridor preservation, roadway impacts, and decommissioning requirements. Mr. Hosford repeatedly emphasized that many of the numerical standards in the draft were placeholders intended for Board discussion and could be adjusted before adoption.

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The Board discussed increasing the setback requirement from occupied residential dwellings from 500 feet to 1,000 feet. Commissioners expressed concern about protecting nearby homeowners from visual impacts, noise, and potential risks associated with battery storage facilities. There was general agreement that a 1,000-foot setback from residential dwellings would provide greater protection while still allowing flexibility during future negotiations with developers.

- Members also reviewed proposed vegetative buffering requirements, roadway setbacks, panel spacing, impervious surface limitations, noise standards, and requirements for maintaining natural drainage patterns. The consensus was to begin with strong standards that could be negotiated if necessary, rather than adopting weaker requirements initially.
- Considerable discussion centered on battery storage facilities and fire protection concerns. Commissioners questioned how lithium battery fires would be handled in rural areas lacking water systems and discussed the possibility of requiring developers to provide additional fire suppression measures, emergency response resources, or specialized equipment. While no specific requirement was finalized, there was broad agreement that emergency response planning and fire protection would be important considerations in future revisions.
- The Board also discussed inspection and enforcement responsibilities. Mr. Hosford advised that utility-scale solar projects would likely require specialized inspections beyond the expertise of existing county staff. He recommended including language requiring developers to reimburse the county for third-party inspection costs, ensuring taxpayers would not bear the expense of technical reviews and compliance monitoring.
- Discussion also focused on the ordinance's proposed threshold requiring a Comprehensive Plan amendment for facilities exceeding 1,000 contiguous acres. Commissioners questioned whether the threshold should be lowered, but ultimately discussed keeping the 1,000-acre figure in the draft for further consideration. The conversation emphasized that the purpose of the threshold is to trigger additional review for projects large enough to significantly impact countywide land use patterns, forestry operations, infrastructure, and rural character.
- The workshop expanded into a broader discussion regarding potential future data center development and the relationship between data centers and utility-scale solar facilities. Mr. Hosford explained that many large data centers require substantial power generation and may be associated with future solar projects. Concerns were raised about water consumption, electrical demand, cooling systems, noise generation, and long-term impacts on local infrastructure.
- Several commissioners discussed whether Liberty County should consider adopting a temporary moratorium on data center development while the county studies the issue further. Examples from neighboring counties were referenced, with some counties adopting moratoriums and others pursuing outright bans. Supporters of a moratorium argued it would provide time for education and policy development before receiving development applications, while others expressed concern that a moratorium could discourage economic development

opportunities and potential tax revenue.

- Discussion concluded with direction to revise the ordinance by increasing the residential dwelling setback to 1,000 feet, maintaining the proposed impervious surface limitations and buffering standards, and adding language requiring applicants to bear the cost of specialized inspections. Staff and the County Attorney were directed to prepare the revised draft for advertisement and consideration at the Board's upcoming July meeting while continuing discussions regarding future data center regulations and possible moratorium options.

7. Clerk Ford - Budget Update

Minutes:

- Chairman Branch raised concerns about Liberty County continuing to automatically follow the State of Florida's holiday schedule, noting that additional state-approved holidays increase costs and reduce productivity. He explained that departments operating on four-day workweeks can receive extended periods off, while departments such as EMS and the Sheriff's Office must remain staffed and incur additional holiday pay expenses.
- Sheriff Arnold stated that extra holidays increase personnel costs for deputies, detention staff, and dispatchers who must continue working during those periods. Chairman Branch noted that EMS faces similar challenges due to its continuous operations.
- Commissioners discussed whether the county should continue following the state's holiday schedule or establish its own policy. Commissioner Johnson supported continuing the current practice, stating that employees value the additional time off and that the overall cost is relatively small compared to other budget concerns. No action was taken, but the Board agreed the issue may need further review during future budget discussions.
- Clerk Ford distributed budget reports showing budgeted versus actual expenditures for county departments and constitutional offices. He explained that meetings with department heads had been scheduled to begin preparing for the upcoming budget season. Commissioners were encouraged to review the reports and provide feedback on potential efficiencies and cost-saving opportunities. Clerk Ford emphasized the importance of identifying ways to operate more efficiently and stated that the reports would serve as the starting point for upcoming budget discussions.

8. Motion to Adjourn

Minutes:

- Motion to adjourn made by Commissioner Johnson and seconded by Commissioner Brown. Motion Carried.

Florida Statute 125.001 requires that due public notice be given of all regular meetings of the Board of County Commissioners of a County in the State of Florida. Florida Statute 286.0105 requires that notices of any meeting or hearing, if a meeting or hearing is required, must include the following language, "if a person decides to appeal any decision made by the board, agency or commission with respect to any matter considered at such meeting or hearing he will need a

record of the proceedings, and that, for such purpose, he may need to insure that a verbatim record of the proceedings is made, which record includes testimony and evidence upon which the appeal is to be based."

- Dewayne Branch, Chairman _____
- Jace Ford, Clerk _____

Contact: Jace Ford (jford@libertyclerk.com 850-643-2215) | Minutes published on 07/10/2026, adopted on 07/09/2026