

District No. 1 - Ronald Williams  
District No. 2 - Rocky Ford  
District No. 3 - Robby Hollingsworth  
District No. 4 - Everett Phillips  
District No. 5 - Tim Murphy



**BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS • COLUMBIA COUNTY**

MEMORANDUM

DATE: September 12, 2024

TO: Residents of Fort White  
Fort White Town Council  
Ronnie Frazier, Mayor  
Connie Brecheen, Town Clerk

FR: Rocky Ford, County Commissioner

RE: September 16, 2024 Fort White Town Council Mission

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It is my understanding that the Fort White Town Council has scheduled, on September 16, 2024, a public discussion regarding the water system within the Town of Fort White. I further understand that most of the discussion pertains to the “supply” component of the utility and specifically what is the source of the water distributed and sold within the Town of Fort White. Several options exist for the Town to obtain their water supply; however there is only one best option.

My interest in the water utility is simple. I represent the residents of Fort White as their County Commissioner. I have been passionate about trying to help the residents of Fort White obtain good, clean water for some time and have worked with the Town of Fort White to accomplish this. My interest is not new. I chose to place my thoughts and position regarding the water utility in writing so my views cannot be twisted or altered.

**The people of Fort White deserve quality water.**

Everyone recognizes the poor quality of the water pumped from the Town’s water plant. The water from the wells has a brownish color and is not in compliance with State water quality standards. The Suwannee River Water Management District recognized the inadequacies of the existing well location; therefore, the District purchased and donated to the Town a 100 acre site rather than fund drilling the existing wells deeper. No one feels the current well location is viable for the long term production of quality water. In addition, at the time, the Fort White water treatment plant was in a poorly maintained condition.

BOARD MEETS FIRST AND THIRD THURSDAY AT 5:30 P.M.

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In October of 2019, Mayor Frazier was quoted, "Our water system in Fort White is failing." He also stated that the plant was "a bad design from the beginning." Fort White had to seek outside funding from the State and County for repairs and maintenance of the failing plant. So, the Town and the County began looking for a new source for water.

The Town and the County met in a joint session to consider 3 options presented by the Town's engineer: 1) buy a site to build a new wellfield, 2) install wells on the site provided from the Suwannee River Water Management District, or 3) run a water transmission line from the County's Ellisville water plant. The first two options involved drilling new wells and running a raw water line to the existing Fort White plant while continuing operations of the existing treatment facility. Option 3, a line from Ellisville, would send treated water to the Town, eliminating the need for the Town to treat water and allowing residents to tie directly into the transmission line. Both Boards voted that the best option was to run the water line from Ellisville to Fort White.

The Town requested and received a \$1,000,000 appropriation from the Legislature specifically to run the transmission line from Ellisville. The County contributed an additional \$6,000,000 to the project. On multiple occasions, the Town urged the County to speed up the process to get this line built. The line is almost complete and ready for testing. The design was always to connect the line into the existing Fort White Water Plant and use the plant to boost the pressure and possibly enhance the chlorine residual throughout the Fort White water distribution system.

This plan will provide water seamlessly from the wells in Ellisville to the Town and not use the existing Town wells. Raw water from Ellisville requires less treatment and has none of the color issues experienced at the Town wells. Once the line is placed in service, there is no use for the existing wells and the plant will no longer need to treat water that has already been treated.

While this line has been under construction, the County committed to improving the water quality from the existing plant and improving plant condition. This included, but was not limited to, a new generator, replacement and/or repair of the tanks; repair and replacement of pumps, and replacing aging water meters throughout the Town. Rather than rely on contract operators, the County placed an operator at the plant to improve maintenance deficiencies. Steve Roberts, the County Utility Director, redesigned the treatment process from the hydrogen peroxide process recommended by the Florida Rural Water Association to the current chloramine treatment process. Mr. Roberts permitted the redesign of the treatment process to increase chlorine contact time to improve disinfection of the raw water. This recent change has improved the water quality but does not address the color concerns.

The County will complete the project no later than December 2024. Residents will see no change in utility billing or rates; they will see improved water quality. Publicly, the Town has indicated their intent is to keep the Interlocal Agreement that allows the County to maintain and operate the Town's water system at the County's expense and without a charge to the Town's government. The Town of Fort White has the option to terminate the agreement with a 12-month notice providing time for the Town's transition.

Under the current agreement, the County operates the system and provides for all of the operation and maintenance costs. The Town sets the water rates. If the Town chooses to end the agreement, the County will step away and the Town will begin operating the water system and the Town will cover the operations and maintenance costs.

The Town always has the option to keep the existing wells and water plant operable as a backup at the Town's expense. Should the Town decide to do so, the Town would need to separate from the Ellisville water line to avoid cross contamination. The Town will also need to test the wells monthly to avoid the need to re-permit the system when the wells are placed in use. As I stated, the current plan provides treated water from Ellisville and uses the existing Fort White plant as a booster. This eliminates the cost of treating the water in Fort White and maintaining the filter system to address color issues.

I also understand concerns about the reliability of the Ellisville connection. All systems require maintenance and can experience problems over time. The County has two wells that rotate providing redundancy if one fails. If one fails we can still meet the Town's needs from the one well and repairs will begin immediately. This recently occurred and has been fixed without any service interruptions. In addition, the County is adding a third well with greater capacity and in a separate location.

Ultimately, it is a decision for the Town. I hope the decision is based on cost-benefit and sound engineering, not emotion. Until notified by the Town of Fort White, the County will continue operations and continue to try and improve the quality of water provided to our residents.