

Board of Directors Meeting West Tennessee River Basin Authority October 10, 2025

The Board of Directors meeting of the West Tennessee River Basin Authority was held at 11:30 a.m. on Friday, October 10, 2025, in the West Tennessee River Basin Authority conference room. Board members in attendance included: Mayor Joseph Butler, Mayor Barry Hutcherson, Mayor Gary Reasons, Mayor David Quick, Mayor Rhea Taylor, Mayor Nelson Cunningham, Mayor Todd Pulse, Mayor Danny Cook, Mayor Larry Smith, Dr. James Byford, Sen. Ed Jackson, and Rep. Chris Todd. Advisory Board members and other guests in attendance were Congressman David Kustoff, Ranson Goodman, Jai Templeton, Rudy Collins, Larry Armstrong, Stefan Maupin, Malcolm Burchfiel, Matt Fennel, Monte Blue, Jake Rogers, and Patrick Parker (OGC). A quorum was verified, Mayor Nelson Cunningham gave the invocation, in Chairman AJ Massey absence Vice-Chairman James Byford called the meeting to order.

The following agenda items were discussed:

Public Comment

Vice Chairman Byford asked if there was anyone to offer public comment. There was no response from members of the public. No action was taken during the public comment period.

Congressman Kustoff Remarks

Congressman David Kustoff attended the Board of Directors meeting to provide a brief update on federal appropriations and related legislative issues. He announced that the WTRBA Riverbank Stabilization Project has received preliminary approval for \$2.5 billion in Community Funding Project support and has advanced through the House Appropriations Committee. Final approval is delayed due to the ongoing federal government shutdown and budget negotiations.

He also discussed national issues impacting the region, including agricultural trade, law enforcement coordination, and federal funding priorities. Congressman Kustoff expressed appreciation for WTRBA's partnership and reaffirmed his support for advancing West Tennessee projects at the federal level. The Board thanked Congressman Kustoff for his continued support and engagement.

July 2025 Board of Directors Meeting Minutes

Director Blackwood presented the July 2025 WTRBA Board of Director meeting minutes. With no questions, Vice-Chairman Byford asked for a motion to approve the July 2025 Board of Directors meeting minutes. A motion was made by Mr. Gary Reasons and seconded by Mayor Joseph Butler. All voted in favor and the motion passed.

WTRBA Financials

Director Blackwood reviewed the financial reports and graphs with the board, stating that as of August 2025, expenses were **\$698,844** of the **\$7,326,900** annual budget for **Operating Funds (327.26)**. The **Maintenance Account (327.24)** began the year with **\$1,750,700** and actual expenses through November 2024 were **\$129,072**. Year-to-date county funds for **FY24/25** are **\$546,790**. Copies of the financial reports were attached to the minutes. A motion to accept the financial reports was made by Mayor Todd Pulse and seconded by Mayor Gary Reasons. All voted in favor and the motion passed.

2025 Flood Recovery Update

Director Blackwood reported that most of the agency's maintenance and engineering efforts have been concentrated on recovery from the series of devastating floods that occurred in April 2025. He noted that without the April event, focus would still be on damage from the February floods. Of the \$1.2 million

allocated for recovery efforts, approximately \$700,000 has been spent since the effective date of July 1, allowing work to begin immediately. A remaining list of projects is planned for the fall to further advance recovery. Director Blackwood then invited Chris to combine the flood recovery discussion with the Engineering and Maintenance Update.

Engineering / Maintenance Update

Kris Gordon reported that recent engineering and maintenance efforts have been primarily focused on flood recovery projects. Work continues in coordination with TDOT on the Big Muddy and Rye Creek mitigation projects. ARP funding is supporting Central Creek, Hatchie Cub, and Trace Creek Lowhead Dam projects, with construction completion anticipated by September 2026 and work expected to begin in spring.

Restroom installation at Middle Fork Bottoms State Park is on track for late October. Engineering work is ongoing for Cub Creek Phase 1B and Phase 2, as well as mitigation efforts at the Wetlands Research Center in Jackson and Dyer Creek in support of the Great Wolf Lodge project.

Amphibious equipment has been used extensively for major debris removal and channel clearing along the Middle Fork Bottoms, North Fork Obion, Middle Fork Obion, and Big Sandy River systems. Contractors will next address North Fork Deer, Rutherford Fork, and South Fork Obion. In-house crews are continuing work on smaller waterways in McNairy, Hardin, Decatur, and Henderson Counties, following a planned counterclockwise rotation.

Equipment upgrades from belt- to chain-driven systems are scheduled for winter to improve operational efficiency. Crews have also addressed nine river overtopping concerns, with one additional site scheduled for review next week. Significant sand removal and regrading were required in several locations to restore riverbank stability.

With major recovery work nearing catch-up, crews have resumed routine maintenance and construction projects, including a fish passage structure on Piney Creek and maintenance at North Fork 27, Gibson County, Dyer Creek, and Mount Carmel lakes.

Kris Gordon noted the team's extensive workload following the April flood and expressed appreciation for the crews' efforts throughout the summer.

WET Center Update

WET Center Executive Director, Alison Franklin reported that the WET Center groundbreaking has been rescheduled for April to allow for more favorable weather and to coordinate with the Governor's availability. The Board's April meeting is anticipated to coincide with the groundbreaking ceremony. The new projected grand opening is September 27, 2027, delayed slightly from the original July timeline due to design and construction adjustments. Three contractors have qualified to bid on the facility, with bids expected in early December.

Recruitment for an Administrative Services Assistant II has closed with 52 applicants. Interviews are planned for late October, with the goal of hiring within 30–45 days.

Ms. Franklin provided an update on recent swift water rescue activities, including a successful workshop with state and local emergency response partners. Interest in the center is growing, including outreach from out-of-state entities such as a new swift water rescue center in West Virginia. The WET Center website is expected to launch by the end of the year.

A “sandbox” subject matter expert team is being formed—including WTRBA staff, engineers, and equipment operators—to develop curriculum for the first “Rivers and Roads” course focused on culvert installation and infrastructure best practices. Three partnership agreements are in development with the Tennessee Board of Regents, TEMA, and UT’s Institute of Public Service and will be brought before the Board for approval prior to execution.

Ms. Franklin also presented the nearly finalized design of the interactive watershed table, which will depict Tennessee’s three grand divisions and key landmarks, allowing visitors to visualize how water moves through the state. The feature is expected to provide an educational and engaging experience for all ages, and sponsorship opportunities are available.

Funding Fiscal Year 2027

Director Blackwood provided an update on planning and funding priorities for the 2027 fiscal year, noting that funding considerations are ongoing with no downtime in the budgeting process. He stated that funding requests have been submitted through TDEC as part of the Governor’s Conservation Budget proposal.

The proposal includes funding for one additional equipment operator to serve as a high-level floater to support multiple teams and increase operational efficiency. Director Blackwood explained that current crews operate in pairs, and if one person is unavailable, the entire team’s work is delayed. Adding one operator would significantly improve field capacity.

Additionally, funding is being requested for two engineering and technical positions to support construction management and inspection for larger regional projects, as current staffing levels limit capacity despite available contract funding. He emphasized that more funding alone will not increase productivity without additional staff to manage project delivery.

Blackwood also addressed liability concerns associated with 113 orphan lakes on defunct districts. The proposal outlines a one-time offer for counties to transfer these lakes into the Authority’s maintenance program, as the Authority has the knowledge and capability to maintain the infrastructure. If counties do not participate, liability will remain with them, as they underwrite the soil conservation districts.

He further highlighted rising operational and maintenance costs, noting significant price increases in critical equipment and materials. For example, bull gears for amphibious excavators have risen from \$15,000 to \$42,000 and are no longer manufactured, requiring conversion to chain drive systems. Chemical and materials costs have also doubled or tripled in some cases.

The total funding request is approximately \$1 million in recurring funds. Blackwood acknowledged that recurring funding is not the preferred mechanism but emphasized its necessity to sustain conservation efforts and maintain critical infrastructure.

He closed by recognizing the dedication of field crews, who recently responded to major equipment failures in difficult conditions, demonstrating their commitment and resourcefulness.

Regional Outreach

Director Blackwood provided an overview of recent regional outreach efforts, noting that this work supports the agency’s broader strategic priorities. He highlighted three key engagements: participation in the Governor’s Conservation Summit, hosting representatives from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) Mississippi Valley Division, and attending the Greater Jackson Chamber’s Day on the Hill in Washington, D.C.

At the Governor’s Conservation Summit, Director Blackwood presented on the history of conservation in West Tennessee, emphasizing the region’s track record of large-scale initiatives and the need for consistent follow-through on legacy projects. He discussed ongoing concerns such as orphan lakes and increasing flood risks, noting the importance of developing solutions to maintain and improve existing infrastructure.

During the USACE visit, discussions focused on the April flood event and flood control strategies for the Obion River system. Blackwood outlined the need for formal planning around levee systems and emphasized that existing spoil piles do not provide reliable protection. USACE expressed interest in supporting a comprehensive study to explore formal levee systems and floodway planning.

Director Blackwood also summarized the Day on the Hill trip, during which the delegation met with representatives from the EPA, Department of Energy, USDA, Tennessee congressional offices, and other federal agencies. Topics included regulatory streamlining, infrastructure support, power needs, and agricultural challenges. He concluded by noting a key takeaway from the visit—underscoring the central role of watershed management in supporting agriculture and community resilience across West Tennessee.

Other Business/Adjourn

Director Blackwood announced that Paige Keith would be departing WTRBA, with her last day being today. Paige has accepted a new position as Director of Group Sales for Tourism in Jackson. He expressed appreciation for her nearly five years of dedicated service, noting her many contributions to the Board and organization. In recognition of her work, she was presented with the organization’s Brass Beaver Award. The Board and attendees applauded her service and extended their well wishes for her future endeavors.

Director Blackwood brought forward a proposal, previously discussed by the Executive Committee, to host an appreciation event for field staff in recognition of their extraordinary efforts, including extended hours and work during and after the recent rain events. The proposed event would include a debrief and team-building activities, with a day and dinner format. Lone Oaks has offered to host the event. A motion to approve the appreciation event was made by Mayor Gary Reasons, seconded by Mayor Joseph Butler. All unanimously approved by the Board. The event will specifically honor the field staff for their work over the past year.

Mayor AJ Massey, Chairman

Mr. Joe McKinnon, Secretary

Upcoming meetings:

Executive Committee on Tuesday, November 18, 2025 @ 9:30am

Executive Committee on Tuesday, December 16, 2025 @ 9:30am