

Board of Directors Meeting West Tennessee River Basin Authority April 11, 2025

The Board of Directors meeting of the West Tennessee River Basin Authority was held at 11:30 a.m. on Friday, April 11, 2025, in the West Tennessee River Basin Authority conference room. Board members in attendance included: Mayor Mark Ward, Mayor Gary Reasons, Mayor Nelson Cunningham, Mayor Randy Geiger, Mayor AJ Massey, Mayor Steve Carr, Patrick Lemons, Dr. James Byford, Mr. Joe McKinnon, and Rep. Chris Todd. Advisory Board members and other guests in attendance were Brady Hurley, Brandon Conner, Jake Mallard, Ranson Goodman, Jai Templeton, Brad Robbins, Rudy Collins, Tyler Lock, Stefan Maupin, Malcolm Burchfiel, Libbie Rushton, Matt Fennel, Mark Thurman, Hugh Adams, Richard Holland, Addison Yarbrough, Seth Taylor, and Patrick Parker (OGC). Mayor Dale Hutcherson and Pam Harrison joined via TEAMS. A quorum was verified, Mayor Gary Reasons gave the invocation, and Chairman AJ Massey called the meeting to order.

The following agenda items were discussed:

Public Comment

Chairman Massey 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.

January 2025 Board of Directors Meeting Minutes

Director Blackwood presented the January 2025 WTRBA Board of Director meeting minutes. With no questions, Chairman Massey asked for a motion to approve the January 2025 Board of Directors meeting minutes. A motion was made by Mr. Gary Reasons and seconded by Representative Chris Todd. 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 January 2025, expenses were **\$2,300,178** of the **\$7,094,500** annual budget for **Operating Funds (327.26)**. The **Maintenance Account (327.24)** began the year with **\$1,615,500** and actual expenses through November 2024 were **\$801,091**. 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 Mr. Joe McKinnon and seconded by Mayor Gary Reasons. All voted in favor and the motion passed.

April 2025 Flooding Events

Director Blackwood delivered an in-depth briefing on the recent severe weather and flooding events that occurred in early April, which had a widespread impact across West Tennessee—an unusual characteristic compared to typical, more localized flooding. The event was anticipated several days in advance, beginning around March 30–31, and WTRBA began monitoring conditions closely alongside the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Initial concerns were validated as conditions worsened steadily through the week, ultimately resulting in significant flooding and storm damage across multiple counties. Director Blackwood highlighted the coordinated efforts between the agency and federal partners, particularly in response to levee vulnerabilities in areas like Rives, where gaps previously identified during the February flooding were proactively patched. The Army Corps provided large-capacity pumps which were deployed in critical locations to prevent urban flooding.

In addition to river flooding, the region was also affected by severe storms and tornadoes, particularly in McNairy and Hardeman counties, which caused fatalities, structural damage, and debris blockage of critical drainage infrastructure. Agency teams responded rapidly, mobilizing equipment such as a trackhoe to reopen a clogged drainage canal in the Selmer industrial park area, likely preventing further flood damage to businesses.

The Corps' use of inundation mapping proved vital in predicting river crest levels, combining past and forecasted rainfall data to produce maximum flood projections. These projections were accurate, and in many cases indicated levels that exceeded previous major flood events such as those in 2010, 2011, and 2019. The agency communicated these risks broadly, including a detailed river forecast summary sent to board members, warning that flooding could surpass earlier events by as much as a foot in some areas. This proved to be the case in Rives, where water levels approached the 1997 high-water mark, overtopping levees and flooding the town despite the improvements made.

Director Blackwood praised the agency's field teams for their tireless work—many of whom spent 10 consecutive days in the field inspecting infrastructure, including 108 high- and significant-hazard lakes. Emergency measures were also required at Mount Carmel Lake, where a blockage forced a siphon drawdown to prevent overflow and potential dam failure. A major concern emphasized was the unusually long duration of the floodwaters in many areas—up to six or seven days rather than the typical three—leading to soil saturation, bank instability, and an increased risk of delayed failures and landslides.

Agricultural impacts are extensive. Early GIS analysis, using the 100-year floodplain as a proxy, suggests that up to 800,000 acres of farmland may have experienced flooding. Reports have come in regarding blown-out tile drainage systems, failed agricultural levees, extensive debris, and large sand deposits—some as deep as three feet and spanning 50 acres. These impacts will require long-term cleanup and rehabilitation, and the scale is likely to rival or exceed the 2010 flood. With over 500 miles of main river and up to 2,000 miles of tributary creeks affected, Director Blackwood estimated the recovery and maintenance workload could represent three to four additional years of labor for agency staff.

To support documentation and recovery, the Army Corps has committed to capturing high-resolution satellite imagery from April 8, providing a clear snapshot of the flood extent and infrastructure performance across West Tennessee. This data will be instrumental in verifying claims and guiding federal assistance programs. The flood has been declared a federal disaster, enabling access to funds from agencies such as FEMA and FSA for cleanup, repairs, and mitigation efforts. Director Blackwood encouraged stakeholders to meticulously document their damages and activities, noting that public infrastructure may qualify for funding, while private levees may not unless they serve a critical public function.

Finally, Director Blackwood noted the urgent need for a system-wide review of water infrastructure and watershed management across West Tennessee. Many current plans date back decades—with one identified from 1982—and the region has undergone significant changes since then. He emphasized that the agency seeks actionable outcomes from this event and is committed to turning lessons learned into meaningful improvements. He welcomed input from local partners, including photographs, reports, and damage locations, noting that this grassroots information is often the agency's first alert to developing issues. The agency will continue coordination with federal and academic partners and is focused on both short-term recovery and long-term resilience planning.

WET Center Update

WET Center Director Alison Franklin provided an update stating she and Director David Blackwood had presented the center's design and development plans to the State Building Commission in Nashville the

previous day, where they received approval to move into the construction document phase. This next phase is expected to take approximately 60 days, after which the project will be posted for bids, with a goal to break ground in fall 2025. The WET Center has a projected construction timeline of 540 days, targeting an official opening in July 2027, weather and other variables permitting.

Franklin then introduced the WET Center's new logo, which marks the beginning of the branding process. Designed to be simple yet meaningful, the logo prominently features a stylized "W" representing "wet," "water," and "west," with three overlapping bars symbolizing the collaboration between the WTRBA, UTIA, and trainees. The geometric design evokes infrastructure elements like bridges and culverts, while also incorporating the image of a water droplet through negative space—an intentional nod to the center's focus on water-related innovation and training.

Franklin described the center's unique features, including a 60,000-square-foot "sandbox" for simulating flash floods, backwater events, and infrastructure repair, as well as a 450-foot-long flume designed for swift water rescue training. She emphasized that recent flooding events have only reinforced the relevance and urgency of the center's mission, noting increased interest from partners and stakeholders. During the State Building Commission review, a key question raised was whether the facility would be large enough to accommodate anticipated demand—something Franklin saw as a positive indicator of the center's importance.

Finally, she requested the board's approval of the proposed logo to proceed with formal branding review at the state level. With no further discussion Chairman Massey asked for motion to be made to move forward with branding. Representative Chris Todd made a motion and seconded by Mayor Gary Reasons. All voted in favor and the motion passed.

Special Projects / Programs

Due to the recent events that took place throughout West Tennessee, Director Blackwood and Chairman Massey proposed a motion to approve the pursuit of funding and project initiation for four listed agenda items—the **Obion River Repair, Trezevant Grade Controls, Hoosier Creek and Obion River Assessment, and Lewis Creek**—contingent upon the availability of state or federal funding, including funding that may become available through the recent disaster declaration. The intent is to enable timely progress on these projects without requiring further board action if funding becomes available prior to the next scheduled meeting. A motion was made by Mayor Steve Carr and seconded by Mayor Gary Reasons. All voted in favor and the motion passed.

- **South Fork Floodplain Restoration Property**

Director Blackwood presented a recommendation from the Executive Committee regarding the South Fork Floodplain Restoration Project. This project is modeled after the successful Middle Fork Bottoms initiative and involves a collaborative effort among several groups to acquire and restore approximately 1,000 acres of floodplain land. The area in question has already been identified and highlighted for its restoration potential, and a contract for its purchase is in place with a scheduled closing date in June. The restoration would include channel restoration and floodplain reconnection efforts to restore natural hydrological functions and increase floodwater storage capacity. Director Blackwood asked the board to consider accepting ownership and stewardship of the property once acquired so the necessary restoration work can proceed, with the understanding that the property would eventually be transferred to a permanent managing entity once restoration is complete.

In response to questions from Representative Todd, Director Blackwood elaborated on additional project components beyond flood mitigation. These include transportation improvements—such as enhanced connectivity between Jackson and South Jackson, pedestrian and bike infrastructure via greenways, and support for a planned bypass route. Recreational amenities are also planned, with

potential for kayaking, fishing, and boating, as well as walking trails and park-like connections to nearby public lands. The restoration will also relieve flooding pressure from areas like Cane Creek, Anderson Creek, and Bemis, and help alleviate chronic backwater issues along nearby railroads.

With no further discussion Chairman Massey asked for a motion to approve. All voted in favor and the motion passed.

- **Stream Mitigation Facility**

Director Blackwood presented a recommendation from the Executive Committee regarding the purchase of a Stream Mitigation Facility in Three Way, Tennessee. The proposed facility is adjacent to the Middle Fork Bottoms and was formerly used as a greenhouse center—specifically, the Dutch Garden Center—with greenhouses imported from Holland valued at approximately \$1 million. The property, appraised at \$1.8 million (with final verification pending from the State Building Commission), offers significant potential for supporting the Authority’s growing stream mitigation and floodplain restoration programs. With approximately \$25 million anticipated to be invested in stream restoration efforts over the next five to six years, this facility would provide a centralized, well-located base for operations, equipment storage, and materials management—helping to reduce costs and increase efficiency across multiple projects.

Director Blackwood emphasized that this purchase would be funded through the stream mitigation program and would not compete with funds designated for other infrastructure initiatives. Representative Todd inquired about the value and strategic location of the facility compared to alternative, potentially lower-cost options. Blackwood clarified that the unique features of the property, including existing high-value structures, sewer service, and proximity to key project areas, justify the investment. Chairman Massey added that, from a broader perspective, such a facility strengthens the visibility and legitimacy of WTRBA’s work and highlighted the importance of positioning the organization for long-term funding and advocacy success. The board unanimously approved the motion to proceed with the purchase and to continue processing with the State Building Commission.

Contracts

- **Running Reelfoot Bayou**

Director Blackwood informed the board of an upcoming contract for improvement work on Running Reelfoot Bayou. The project will involve the reconstruction of the middle third of the 20-mile channel, significant maintenance on the lower third, and habitat conversion on the upper third. The total estimated cost of the project is approximately \$7 million, with all necessary funds already allocated. The work will include trackhoe excavators and dirt pan operations and is expected to be underway by summer. Director Blackwood noted the importance of keeping regional stakeholders informed as the project progresses.

- **Environmental Services Contract**

Director Blackwood announced that an Environmental Services Contract will be released in the coming months. This contract is intended to streamline necessary environmental monitoring and assessments—such as wetland and stream determinations—that support board-approved construction projects. The contract will only apply to projects already approved by the board. Director Blackwood encouraged board members to share this opportunity with any environmental consulting firms that may be interested in participating.

- **(Added) Emergency Maintenance Contract**

Director Blackwood presented a proposal requiring board approval for establishing an emergency maintenance contract in response to an anticipated increase in workload over the next three to four years. While the current amphibious trackhoe contract provides some supplemental support, it will not be sufficient to meet the goal of completing necessary maintenance by the fall. The proposed plan involves identifying and contracting with three qualified vendors in the region, splitting the work evenly among them. This would enable rapid mobilization as funding becomes available, ensuring that cleanup and maintenance efforts are completed by summer. The board discussed the plan, which aligns with emergency contracting guidelines established by central procurement services. Following discussion, the board voted unanimously in favor of pursuing the emergency maintenance contracts.

Regional Outreach

Director Blackwood reported on the success of the 2025 West Tennessee Water Resources Symposium, which was part of the regional outreach efforts. The event was well attended despite some scheduling conflicts and the absence of certain federal participants. Sponsorship support remained strong, totaling \$5,500, which helped offset the event's total cost of just over \$7,000. Since the board had previously approved up to \$10,000 for the symposium, the out-of-pocket expense was limited to roughly \$1,500. The event hosted around 150 participants and provided a valuable platform for discussing water science and related topics, making it a cost-effective and impactful outreach effort.

Other Business/Adjourn

- **Flood Task Force**

Director Blackwood proposed the formation of a flood task force in response to recent storm events, drawing from past models used during emergencies such as Waverly and Eileen. The purpose of the task force would be to gather information, improve communication among agencies, and develop both immediate response strategies and long-term flood mitigation plans. Board members, including Mr. Hugh and Chairman Massey, supported the idea, emphasizing the importance of proactive planning in addition to emergency response. Blackwood suggested involving County Highway Supervisors and Emergency Management Agencies (EMAs) in the task force to better share local impacts and coordinate efforts. He noted that initial outreach had already taken place in counties like Obion, Madison, Carroll, Weakley, and Henry, where significant damage had occurred. Discussion highlighted the need for better communication tools and early-warning systems, with Kris Gordon adding that a state-supported flood modeling tool is available to local teams, providing real-time projections based on forecasted rainfall. The board expressed consensus to move forward with establishing the task force.

- **TNC Contract**

Director Blackwood informed the board that the current agreement with The Nature Conservancy (TNC), a long-standing partner in flood-related initiatives, is set to expire in June—one month prior to the next scheduled board meeting. The agreement involves cost-sharing for a position focused on flood resiliency and floodplain connectivity. Blackwood requested board approval to renew the agreement to maintain the partnership. The total cost is approximately \$90,000. Chairman Massey called for a motion. Representative Chris Todd made a motion with Mayor Steve Carr seconded. All voted in favor and the motion passed.

With no further business, Chairman Massey called for a motion to adjourn. A motion to adjourn was made by Representative Chris Todd and seconded by Mayor Gary Reasons.

Mayor AJ Massey, Chairman

Mr. Joe McKinnon, Secretary

Upcoming meetings:

Executive Committee on Tuesday, May 20, 2025 @ 9:30am

Executive Committee on Tuesday, June 17, 2025 @ 9:30am

Board of Directors on Friday, July 11, 2025 @ 11:30 a.m.