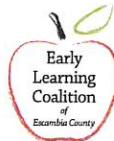


Board Meeting

January 6, 2026

Consent Agenda

1. Agenda	CA 1
2. Public Announcements	CA 2-3
3. Minutes: December 2, 2025	CA 4-8
4. Minutes: December 15, 2025	CA 9-11



Early Learning Coalition of Escambia County
Board Meeting Agenda
January 6, 2026, at 10:30 a.m.

Pages

I. Welcome and Introductions

- a. Notification of this meeting of the Board of Directors was sent to the Pensacola News Journal for publication on January 6, 2026, and posted to the Coalition Public Calendar Board.

II. Public Comments

III. Chair Opening Comments

- a. Approval of Consent Agenda: Meeting Agenda and Minutes of December 2, 2025 and Minutes of December 15, 2025(BA)

IV. New Business

- a. News Articles (I)
- b. Hiring Committee Recommendation (BA)

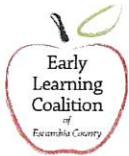
V. Adjourn

Next Meeting: Thursday, February 12, 2026, at 10:00 a.m. at the Early Learning Coalition offices, 1720 W. Fairfield Dr., Suite 100/400, Pensacola, FL 32501

Key: (BA) = Board Approval (D) = Discussion (I) = Information Att = Attached file

The mission of the Early Learning Coalition of Escambia County is to identify and meet the needs of children and families to lay the foundation for lifetime success by: maximizing each child's potential, preparing children to enter school ready to learn, and helping families achieve economic self-sufficiency.

CA 1



Early Learning Coalition of Escambia County

1720 West Fairfield Drive, Suite 100/400
Pensacola FL. 32501

DATE: January 5, 2026

PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENT

A meeting of the legislatively mandated Early Learning Coalition of Escambia County

**Board Meeting will be held on
Tuesday, 6th of January at 10:30 a.m.**

at the

Joyce Griffin Room for Professional Development and Testing
Early Learning Coalition of Escambia County
1720 West Fairfield Drive, Suite 100/400
Pensacola, FL. 32501

The agenda and meeting materials will be posted to www.elcescambia.org.
For more information, or to receive an invite to the full virtual meeting, call or email:
Renee Maxwell, Administrative Aide at (850) 595-5402 or askelc@elcescambia.org.

The meeting may be accessed by:

Joining the Zoom Meeting:

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/83664003175?pwd=CoVFGnCJhQoE1Ks95fCWEmpbmjPFTA.1>

Meeting ID: 836 6400 3175

Passcode: 135650



CA 2

Renee Maxwell

From: Renee Maxwell
Sent: Monday, January 5, 2026 9:45 AM
To: Pensacola News Journal (business@pnj.com)
Subject: Public Service Announcement January 2026

Good morning,

Please post the following January 2026 meeting in your free government meeting calendar for the Early Learning Coalition of Escambia.

Board Meeting will be held on Tuesday, January 6, 2026, at 10:30am.

The meeting will be held in the Joyce Griffin Room for Professional Development and Testing
at the Early Learning Coalition of Escambia County
1720 West Fairfield Drive Suite 100/400 Pensacola, FL 32501

The meeting may be accessed by:

Joining the Zoom Meeting

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/83664003175?pwd=CoVFGnCJhQoE1Ks95fCWEmpbmjPFTA.1>

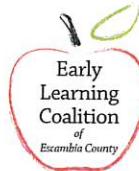
Meeting ID: 836 6400 3175

Passcode: 135650

Renee Maxwell
Administrative Aide
Early Learning Coalition of Escambia County
1720 West Fairfield Dr.
Suite 100/400
Pensacola, FL 32501

rmaxwell@elcescambia.org www.elcescambia.org
Main: 850-595-5400, Direct Office Line: 850-595-5402

Sunshine Law and Public Records Caution: 1) The Florida Government in the Sunshine Law prohibits discussion outside of a duly noticed meeting between any two or more Early Learning Coalition of Escambia County board members regarding any matter that may come before the Board. This prohibition extends to discussions via email. 2) Furthermore, most email communications made or received by the Early Learning Coalition of Escambia County members or staff are considered public records that must be retained and, upon request, made available to the public and media.



**Early Learning Coalition of Escambia County
Board Meeting Minutes
December 2, 2025, 10:00 a.m.
Chair: Vacant**

Members in Attendance

Roger Thompson	Bambi Sealy	Tammy Hicks
Shacondra Primm	Deborah Tucker	Cindy Kirk
Brian Wyer	Tarae Donaldson	Mary Ann Bickerstaff
Lindsey Cannon	Doug Brown	Reginald Dogan
Melissa Sidoti	Mona Jackson	

Members Absent

Edna Williams	Deanna Oleske	Paul Fetsko
Craig Jones		

Public in Attendance

Marcus McBride

Staff in Attendance

Bruce Watson	Nina Daniels	Tom Porter
Melissa Jennings	Renee Maxwell	

I. Welcome and Introduction

Notification of this meeting of the Board of Directors was sent to the Pensacola News Journal for publication on November 22, 2025, and posted to the Coalition Public Calendar Board. The meeting was called to order by the Vice Chair, Ms. Hicks.

II. Public Comments

- a. None.

III. Chair Opening Comments

a. **Approval of Consent Agenda: Meeting Agenda and Minutes of November 13, 2025**, Upon a motion made by Mr. Thompson and seconded by Ms. Bickerstaff, the Meeting Agenda and Minutes of November 13, 2025, were approved without objection.

IV. ED Selection/Hiring Process

- a. **Executive Director Resignation Letter Amendment dated November 25, 2025**

Mr. Watson presented an amended letter of resignation to the Board. Mr. Watson made changes to his original letter of resignation submitted in July after it was made clear at the November 2025 Board meeting that the Board required Mr. Watson to submit definitive dates for his last day of work and last day of employment. Per the amended letter, the date for Mr. Watson's last day of work is December 23, 2025, and the date for his last day of employment is February 15,



2026. For reference, Mr. Watson included an excerpt from the Personnel Policy and Procedure Manual regarding final PTO for Coalition employees with ten or more years of service.

b. Executive Director Comments on Coalition Status

Mr. Watson mentioned to the Board about the staff having a lot of uncertainty regarding the fact that it has been known since July 2025 that Mr. Watson was resigning, and there has been no decision made on a replacement as of December 2025.

Mr. Watson sent Mrs. Engel to attend the quarterly DEL/ED meeting in Orlando last month in his place. Mr. Watson got feedback from these people attending these meetings and also had conversations with some of the other Coalition Executive Directors about the status of Mrs. Engel. They were surprised to learn that given the opportunity the Board did not hire from within and instead a selection committee was formed.

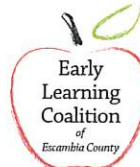
Mr. Watson stated that he has issues with the selection process going back to the August 2025 Board meeting when it was announced that he was resigning and made the recommendation to hire Ms. Engel. The Board did not have any discussion on the merits of the recommendation to hire Ms. Engel for the position up front. The Board went straight from a member making a motion to form a Selection Committee, and after the motion was seconded, immediately put the motion to a vote. The usual step of asking the Board if there was any discussion was not taken.

Mr. Waston stated that he was also not invited to the first and only meeting of the Selection Committee. He believes he was prohibited from attending because he had made a recommendation for someone to be appointed directly and had therefore displayed a bias. Mr. Watson stated that he also felt that some people decided that this somehow disqualified him from participating in the hiring process. Mr. Waston was permitted to attend meetings after the Board tried to assign tasks to the Administrative Aide that was above the scope of her duties and assigned responsibilities.

Mr. Watson stated that at the meetings of the Hiring Committee he attempted to offer guidance and information but some of the committee members made snide comments and questioned the accuracy of his comments. Mr. Watson said that he felt disrespected and that his input was disregarded by the Hiring Committee.

Mr. Watson continued by saying that the only reason Ms. Engel is not being considered for the position is due to her not having a college degree. The Coalition's Job Description clearly states that the position does not require a college degree if applicant has the job experience to compensate for it. Ms. Engel has 16 years of experience at the Coalition and has been trained on most of the Executive Director's duties.

c. Board Discussion and Decision Regarding Next Steps in Selection/Hiring Process



Mr. Thompson stated that after lots of thought since the last meeting, he feels that the best thing for the Coalition at this point is to offer the position to Ms. Engel. Mr. Thompson went on to state that Ms. Engel meets the qualifications and scored high in the interview process.

The members of the Hiring Committee gave a recap of the interviews and stated that both candidates that were interviewed scored close to each other and both candidates interviewed well. The Committee was unable to agree on a candidate to recommend to the Board for the position.

Ms. Sidoti spoke about her experience of hiring an Executive Director at Opening Doors. Ms. Sidoti brought up the idea of having an Interim Executive Director until an Executive Director can be found.

Mr. Brown asked if there was a recommendation from the Hiring Committee. Ms. Cannon responded with it was recommended to bring the issue back to the Board due to the Hiring Committee not being able to give a definitive yes to either candidate. Ms. Cannon stated that the Hiring Committee is looking for guidance from the whole Board.

Mr. Thompson made a motion to select Ms. Engel as the Executive Director with a 90-day probationary period. Mr. Wyer seconded the motion. The motion was discussed and it was agreed to remove the 90-day probationary period from the motion. Mr. Thompson made an amended motion to select Ms. Engel as the Executive Director. Mr. Wyer seconded the motion. The motion was put to a roll call vote. There were 14 Board members in attendance. 4 members were absent. The results of the vote were: 6 members voted Yes; 7 members voted No; and 1 member Abstained. The motion was not approved.

The Board then discussed offering Ms. Engel the position of Interim Executive Director. Mr. Watson stated that Ms. Engel was unable to be at this meeting and he is not sure if she would be willing to accept the position.

Mr. Brown made the motion to appoint Ms. Engel as Interim Executive Director for a period TBD while the Hiring Committee finds a replacement, and at the same time the Board takes immediate action to identify signers on all accounts to ensure there is continuity. Ms. Donaldson seconded the motion. The motion was put to a roll call vote. The motion passed unanimously.

After discussions, it was decided that Mr. Thompson would offer Ms. Engel the position on behalf of the Board. A motion was made by Ms. Hicks and seconded by Ms. Donaldson to have Mr. Thompson offer Ms. Engel the Interim Executive Director position. Mr. Thompson asked to have another Board member be with him when he presents the offer to Ms. Engel. Mr. Watson reminded the Board the if two or more Board members come together, it would have to be a public stated meeting. Mr. Thompson asked Mr. Watson if he would prepare the offer letter to be given to Ms. Engel. Mr. Watson said yes, he would prepare the letter.



It was agreed to have an EXCOM meeting on December 8, 2025 to offer Ms. Engel the offer of being the Interim Executive Director.

The discussion led to talks about the pay increase for the Interim Executive Director position. Mr. Watson stated what Ms. Engel currently makes and stated what he currently makes.

Mr. Watson said, "How much are you going to make it worth her time and effort to hold down a position that quite frankly you're saying she wasn't good enough to be given outright, but you want her to hold down the fort until you pick somebody else."

Ms. Sidoti replied, "I don't think that was what the Board was saying."

Ms. Jackson stated, "We need to stop that and be professional and move on."

Mr. Watson replied, "I'm not a member of the Board. What are you going to do, throw me out of the room. I'll be happy to leave."

Ms. Sidoti made the motion to give Ms. Engel a 10% salary increase for the Interim Executive Director position. Mr. Brown seconded the motion. The motion was approved without objection.

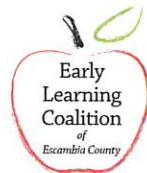
Mr. Watson said, "For the record, Executive Director feels like his inputs are no longer warranted. I'm leaving the room. Y'all tell me what you want me to do when you are done." Before Mr. Watson left the room, Mr. Brown asked if the staff in attendance were going to stay. Mr. Watson replied that the staff were there to listen and if the Board does not want them to stay, then the Board can ask them to leave.

After a brief moment, Mr. Brown stated that he wanted to be on record that the Executive Director deemed his input was not needed and he left the room. Mr. Brown went on to say that he feels that Mr. Watson's behavior was completely inappropriate and unprofessional. Ms. Jackson agreed with Mr. Brown and said she felt like the Board was being bullied. Ms. Hicks added that Mr. Watson is human and cares deeply about this company and its' people. He just wants to ensure that what is done is what is best for the Coalition.

Mr. Brown also wanted on record that to receive recommendation letters of support for a candidate for a position that is not posted creates bias.

A discussion regarding needing to get an Interim Board Chair was started. The Board discussed needing an Interim Board Chair to be able to have someone who would have the authority to sign checks and any other forms or contracts that might need to be signed. The Board asked the Vice Chair, Ms. Hicks, if she would be willing to be the Interim Board Chair until a permanent Board Chair can be found. She agreed to accept the position. Mr. Brown made the motion to appoint Ms. Hicks as the Interim Board Chair until a permanent Board Chair can be found. Mr. Thompson seconded the motion. The motion to make Ms. Hicks the Interim Board Chair was approved without objection.

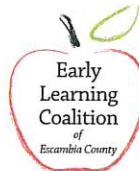
The members of the Hiring Committee agreed to meet on December 9, 2025, at 1:30pm.



V. Adjourn

The meeting was adjourned at 12:43 p.m.

Next Meeting: Thursday, February 12, 2026, at 10:00 a.m. at the Early Learning Coalition offices at 1720 West Fairfield Dr., Suite 100/400, Pensacola, FL 32501



**Early Learning Coalition of Escambia County
Board Meeting Minutes
December 15, 2025, 9:00 a.m.
Interim Chair: Tammy Hicks**

Members in Attendance

Roger Thompson	Bambi Sealy	Tammy Hicks
Shacondra Primm	Deborah Tucker	Cindy Kirk
Brian Wyer	Tarae Donaldson	Mary Ann Bickerstaff
Lindsey Cannon	Doug Brown	Reginald Dogan
Melissa Sidoti	Mona Jackson	Craig Jones
Paul Fetsko		

Members Absent

Edna Williams	Deanna Oleske
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Public in Attendance

None

Staff in Attendance

Bruce Watson	Dawn Engel	Tom Porter
Melissa Jennings	Renee Maxwell	

I. Welcome and Introduction

Notification of this meeting of the Board of Directors was sent to the Pensacola News Journal for publication on December 11, 2025, and posted to the Coalition Public Calendar Board. The meeting was called to order by the Interim Chair, Ms. Hicks.

II. Public Comments

a. None.

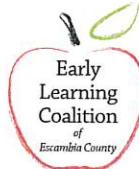
III. New Business

a. Discussion/Approval of Ms. Engel's Counterproposal

The Executive Committee met with Ms. Engel on December 8, 2025, to discuss the Board's offer to temporarily promote Ms. Engel to the position of Interim Executive Director. Ms. Engel offered a counterproposal for the Board to consider.

Ms. Engel stated that she would take the position, but with the following stipulations.

1. An 11.5% increase instead of the 10% that was proposed.
2. If the position is given to another candidate, she would retain the 11.5% pay increase permanently. This is because training the incoming Executive Director will not be a one and done event. It will require extensive interaction over many months.



3. If the position is offered permanently, an \$11,000.00 increase in annual salary in addition to the 11.5% offered for the Interim position.
4. Due to the lack of time remaining for there to be a proper turnover before Mr. Watson's last day of work, Mr. Watson needs to be permitted to come off PTO to help in the transition. Mr. Watson's participation in the transition is necessary. Mr. Watson agreed that with the Board's approval he will make himself available as needed.

A motion was made by the EXCOM and seconded by Mr. Thompson to approve Ms. Engel's counterproposal. The motion was put to a roll call vote to the sixteen Board members in attendance. 11 members voted Yes, 4 members voted No, and 1 member abstained. The motion was approved.

b. Approval of Mr. Watson to conduct turnover after December 23, 2025

This order of business was approved with the approval of Ms. Engel's counterproposal.

c. Approval to add Ms. Hicks, Interim Board Chair, as an authorized signer on the company checking account.

Upon a motion made by Mr. Thompson and seconded by Mr. Jones, adding the Interim Board Chair, Ms. Tamela Hicks, as an authorized signer to the company checking account was approved without objection.

d. Approval of adding an Interim Executive Director to the company checking account.

The Board discussed adding Interim Executive Director, Dawn Engel to the company checking account. Upon the motion made by Mr. Brown and seconded by Mr. Jones, adding Interim Executive Director, Ms. Engel, as an authorized signer to the company checking account was approved without objection.

e. Approval to add Board Treasurer to the company checking account.

Mr. Brown made the motion to add the EXCOM members to the company checking account. Before the motion could be seconded, two EXCOM members stated that they do not wish to be on the company checking account. The motion was withdrawn. The Board Treasurer, Ms. Jackson, stated that she does not have an issue with being added to the company checking account. Mr. Brown made the motion to just add the Board Treasurer, Ms. Jackson, to the company checking account. The motion was seconded by Mr. Wyer. The motion to add the Board Treasurer, Ms. Jackson, as an authorized signer to the company checking account was approved without objection.

f. Delegation Letter for IED

The Board asked Mr. Watson to draft a letter of delegation of authority for the Interim Executive Director for the Interim Board Chair to sign. Mr. Watson agreed to draft the letter.



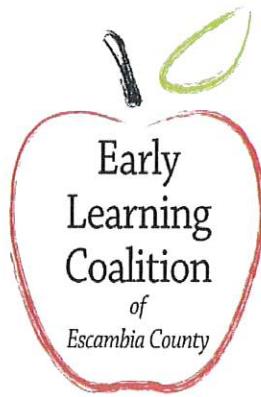
IV. Additional Discussion

The Hiring Committee have 4 interviews scheduled for this week. If the Committee agrees on a candidate, a special Board meeting will be held in January.

V. Adjourn

The meeting was adjourned at 9:38 a.m.

Next Meeting: Thursday, February 12, 2026, at 10:00 a.m. at the Early Learning Coalition offices at 1720 West Fairfield Dr., Suite 100/400, Pensacola, FL 32501



Board Meeting

January 6, 2026

Meeting Package

1. Agenda	1
2. News Articles	2-19



Early Learning Coalition of Escambia County
Board Meeting Agenda
January 6, 2026, at 10:30 a.m.

Pages

I. Welcome and Introductions

- a. Notification of this meeting of the Board of Directors was sent to the Pensacola News Journal for publication on January 6, 2026, and posted to the Coalition Public Calendar Board.

II. Public Comments

III. Chair Opening Comments

- a. Approval of Consent Agenda: Meeting Agenda and Minutes of December 2, 2025 and Minutes of December 15, 2025(BA)

IV. New Business

- a. News Articles (I)
- b. Hiring Committee Recommendation (BA)

V. Adjourn

Next Meeting: Thursday, February 12, 2026, at 10:00 a.m. at the Early Learning Coalition offices, 1720 W. Fairfield Dr., Suite 100/400, Pensacola, FL 32501

Key: (BA) = Board Approval (D) = Discussion (I) = Information Att = Attached file

The mission of the Early Learning Coalition of Escambia County is to identify and meet the needs of children and families to lay the foundation for lifetime success by: maximizing each child's potential, preparing children to enter school ready to learn, and helping families achieve economic self-sufficiency.

Escambia delays dissolving Human Relations Commission until end of year

by USA Today June 8, 2025

Escambia County Board of Commissioners have agreed to postpone dissolving the Escambia-Pensacola Human Relations Commission until the end of the year to give staff time to create an alternate way of handling fair housing complaints.

The Board of County Commissioners initially voted June 5 to sunset the 50-year-old government-funded organization at the end of September. However, after more than a dozen people spoke out against dissolving the HRC at the meeting, the board rescinded its initial vote and voted instead to give Escambia County Administrator Wes Moreno until Dec. 31 to create one full-time position to handle the responsibilities of HRC's executive director.

HRC receives about \$320,000 annually in governmental funding, with about 60% coming from Escambia County and the remainder paid by the city of Pensacola to address discrimination and fair housing complaints, which is required by the federal government.

The county wants to end the interlocal agreement with the city that was created 50 years ago to address those complaints and handle any issues in-house.

Escambia County moved to dissolve the organization after Clerk of Court Pam Childers found several areas of concern with HRC. Childers' review concluded Escambia Pensacola HRC was operating as a county funded not-for-profit, but it was not a transparent arrangement, and it appeared to have little to no oversight. She recommended the county "eliminate the unnecessary and frivolous spending" involved in the program.

The same recommendation was made in 2018 when a clerk's office audit showed the organization had distributed "community relations" dollars to friends and family members, ignored statutorily mandated reporting and transparency obligations, and resolved just a handful of complaints.

HRC was reorganized and supporters say audits show they are making a difference in the community and giving the county a good return on its investment, but the board determined the county could provide the same services in-house.

Escambia County Commissioner Lumen May was among those who protested dissolving the organization.

May does not want to see HRC dissolved at all, and he and other supporters particularly did not like the county's initial solution of pointing people to lodge fair housing complaints through an online "portal," instead of submitting complaints in person with an advocate to hear concerns.



"Before we move on this, we'd like to think in 2025 that fair housing exists and racism doesn't exist and equity exists, but it doesn't," May said. "There's no denying that, so if we were to replace it, what would be replacing it with?"

HRC Executive Director Al Henderson thanked the board for their support but lamented that he did not have opportunity to address their concerns before the decision was made to pull the plug on the organization.

He said they have been submitting regular reports showing the number of calls they handle and complaints they address, and he would have liked the chance to address any issues.

"Ninety nine percent of the people who call us, they are having problems," Henderson said. "They're in crisis mode, so when you look at it and now you add a link, those people are not going to have the benefit of being able to call and get a live body."

Longtime civil rights supporter Ellison Bennett said he feared dissolving the organization would deny vulnerable citizens an opportunity to air grievances that wouldn't normally be heard by others due to discrimination.

"Whether it's fair housing or complaints about discrimination, hatred, bigotry or whatever, I would like to ask this commission, before you vote to dissolve the Human Relations Commission, that you talk to the citizens of this county," Bennett said.

Lily Eubanks and others said they were distressed about the county's position, especially with homelessness and affordable housing a constant issue, and that dissolving the Human Relations Commission was going to make a bad situation worse.

"This action means less accountability, less expertise and less protection from housing discrimination for all members of our community," Eubanks said.

Others like Derek Scott said they were "deeply concerned" about the future of the HRC at a time when "fairness, equity, accountability should be at the heart of our local government."

"For years, the Human Relations Commission has played a vital role in protecting citizens from discrimination, ensuring equal access to opportunities and advocating for those whose voices might otherwise go unheard," Scott said. "To remove it would be to strip away an essential safeguard, a safeguard that protects people from unfair treatment and housing, employment and public accommodations."

Commissioners Steven Barry and Mike Kohler agreed that an online portal was not the best solution to replace the services of the HRC.

Childers recommended the same services could be legally provided through Escambia County's Neighborhood Services Department.

Kohler said he believes that department could handle fair housing complaints more efficiently in-house, but he would like to see a "warm touch" from Escambia Neighborhood Services.

Barry suggested the county administrator explore the possibility of hiring a full-time employee to handle the same responsibilities as HRC's executive director to provide face-to-face human interaction.

He said the same money the county is spending supporting the HRC can be funneled into a new position within the county.

"For a fraction of those resources, we can add that (full-time employee position) that will be a county employee housed in a county building and the accessibility would be, if not greater, at least equal," Barry said.

The board voted four to one in support of delaying dissolving HRC until Dec. 31, with May voting against the motion.

Moreno said he would begin discussions with community leaders to create the fair housing position.

County leaders said their plans to handle fair housing complaints in-house were similar to how they expected the city of Pensacola had expressed plans to handle them.

The city of Pensacola did not respond by deadline to questions about their position on dissolving the HRC or future plans to handle fair housing complaints.

This article originally appeared on Pensacola News Journal: Escambia delays dissolving Human Relations Commission until end of year

Reporting by Mollye Barrows, Pensacola News Journal / Pensacola News Journal

Affordable homes built by Escambia County sitting empty during housing crisis. Here's why:

Mollye Barrows, Pensacola News Journal

Thu, August 22, 2024 at 4:07 AM CDT

8 min read

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Escambia County's use of the State Housing Initiatives Partnership Program (SHIP) is under scrutiny after county staff announced there is no longer any funding available for down payment assistance through the SHIP program. Now some are questioning why the county is spending so much of the state dollars, used jointly by the city of Pensacola and Escambia County, on other programs including building brand new homes and rebuilding others, and it's not really clear who is getting these homes or how recipients are selected.

The county is sitting on 14 homes that were built to help meet the need for affordable housing in the community. Some \$600,000 in SHIP funding was used to build three of them at a cost of about \$200,000 each. The rest are being funded with a combination of state and federal funds. The houses are in various stages of construction, and many are finished or close to being finished.

However, there are no immediate plans to list the houses for sale because county staff say they are still working to find a partner organization to help sell them because it's illegal for the county to do it as a government entity.

Some members and participants of the Affordable Housing Advisory Committee (AHAC) say the unsold homes funded with SHIP monies are tying up dollars that could help replenish the down payment assistance program.

As affordably priced homes come on the market, some housing advocates are concerned that programs designed to help first-time buyers will run out of money.

"Once they sell them or figure out a mechanism to do that, then it would replenish some of the SHIP dollars so that maybe down payment assistance would come back before September of 2025," said AHAC Chair Crystal Scott. "It would put some funds back in the SHIP program for use for something else."

Last month, the county announced that SHIP funding for down payment assistance was no longer available to new applicants because that pot of money had run dry until at least fall of 2025, possibly longer.

Escambia Neighborhood Enterprise Division Manager Garrett Griffin, who helps manage the SHIP dollars, said \$1.3 million was spent on the down payment assistance program, more than double what is typically allocated, because the city and county agreed to give first-time home buyers more money toward down payment assistance due to the sharp rise of home prices. He said they spent more money helping more people this past year than they had budgeted for, so they used the upcoming year's SHIP allocation for down payment assistance dollars to cover all of last year's applicants, which left the coffers for the program empty for the next year to 18 months.

"That money has already been spent because we didn't want to shut the program down," Griffin told members of AHAC at their Aug. 8 meeting, "but we're now at a point where we no longer have a choice. We've got to keep the rest of the money there for our rebuilds, for our emergency rehabs, and for our regular rehabs. Now there's the possibility of getting an additional allocation. If something like that were to happen, then of course we would want to start that back up."

The county says the money goes to projects like housing rehabilitation, down payment assistance, wheelchair ramps, emergency repairs, and new home builds and the county decides how much money each program receives. Of the \$3.2 million in SHIP funding Escambia County and Pensacola received for the past year, the county set aside \$497,500 on 18 units for the purchase assistance program; \$800,000 on four units under the demo/reconstruction program; \$675,000 on nine units under the owner-occupied rehabilitation (OOR) program; \$70,000 on 10 units under the OOR accessibility program; \$25,000 on disaster mitigation/assistance; and \$150,000 on six units under the owner-occupied emergency repair program.

According to an Escambia County press release, the county completed 123 projects since fall of 2023. Of those, 54 were home buyers who received down payment assistance, which has now been suspended. In 2022, the county completed 57 projects, with 36 home buyers receiving down payment assistance through the SHIP program.

At the Aug. 8 AHAC meeting, Pensacola City Housing Administrator Meredith Reeves, who previously worked for Escambia County, questioned how the county is prioritizing the use of SHIP saying even with the increased allocation assistance to first-time home buyers, proportionately the county has dropped the amount that has historically been set aside for down payment assistance.

"Out of these numbers, the majority of purchases are in unincorporated Escambia County," Reeves said at the meeting. "The need to do purchase assistance inside the city limits, the homes are often on average \$40,000 higher, at least. So, there is a need to have more funding if someone's buying in the city limits just because of the price differences."

Mayor wants answers: Pensacola seeks answers from Escambia County on why housing program money is gone

In explaining spending priorities, Escambia County staff discussed the county's home rehabilitation program. Besides repairs like new roofs and windows, the county also builds new houses for some people with no clearly stated criteria as to who receives the assistance except that they are low to moderate income. The county even offers recipients a "custom home experience," spending up to \$195,000 on each house it rebuilds and renovates.

"We've got to get the home plans selected and we have some standard plans that we utilize, but we also sit down with them and really are able to give them a custom home experience," said Griffin. "They get to pick out if they want another bathroom here, they want to move the bedroom around, knock a wall down, add different lighting on the outside of the home, things like that. So they really enjoy that process."

Pensacola Habitat for Humanity Chief Executive Officer Sam Young questioned Griffin about spending so much SHIP funding on building and rehabilitating homes when other programs, like Habitat, can do it for less money, as well as the equity of helping a handful of families with the money as opposed to putting it toward programs that could make the money go farther, like down payment assistance, and returns the investment to the community.

"If I get this right, there are 10 projects at about \$200,000 (each), so that's \$2 million that is completely benefiting 10 families," Young said. "Instead of the 56 families that were served through SHIP down payment assistance, and those dollars get repaid or slowly forgiven, we're helping five to ten families. So someone's making a decision to take SHIP dollars out of down payment assistance, put it into the demo and repair and eating up a whole lot of SHIP dollars for five to 10 families instead of providing (to more down payment assistance SHIP applicants)."

Escambia to dissolve Human Relations Commission after audit finds 'frivolous spending'

Mollye Barrows, Pensacola News Journal

Fri, May 23, 2025 at 4:05 AM CDT

9 min read

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Escambia County plans to dissolve the Escambia Pensacola Human Relations Commission after Clerk of Court Pam Childers found several areas of concern with the 50-year-old, government-funded organization and recommended the county "eliminate the unnecessary and frivolous spending involved in this program."

Escambia's Board of County Commissioners is scheduled to vote on repealing the ordinance that establishes the Human Relations Commission at its next meeting on June 5.

The county administrator says a recent review of HRC has given the board "cause for concern" and the county is now going to handle in-house the anti-discrimination services the entity provided.

"We're going to provide a web page on our website that has links to HUD (the Department of Housing and Urban Development) and to the state where people can go in and log their concerns or complaints," Escambia County Administrator Wes Moreno said. "Those entities will investigate. All we're going to do is provide a resource to point folks in that direction."

What the Escambia Clerk of Court's audit found

Childers' review concluded Escambia Pensacola HRC was operating as a county funded not-for-profit, but it was not a transparent arrangement, and it appeared to have little to no oversight.

In her opinion, the county was not getting a good return on its investment and could provide the same services HRC was created to do.

HRC receives about \$320,000 annually in governmental funding, with about 60% coming from Escambia County and the remainder paid by the city of Pensacola.

What led to audit: New not-for-profit with ties to commissioner makes bid to sell Escambia County built homes

"My recommendation is to eliminate the unnecessary and frivolous spending involved in this program," Childers wrote to County Attorney Alison Rogers and Board Chair Mike Kohler in February. "The County can maintain enforcement of fair housing through delegation to a County department, such as Neighborhood & Human Services, paid for through community development block grant funding."

HRC exists to resolve employment and housing discrimination complaints and to promote and improve relations between races and ethnic groups in the community.

Childers pointed out county laws already expressly prohibit discriminatory housing practices and provide a mechanism to investigate and resolve such complaints through the Fair Housing Board.

She said the mechanism for handling employment discrimination complaints is established in state and federal law through the Florida Commission on Human Rights and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.

What is Escambia-Pensacola Human Relations Commission?

HRC was originally created in 1974 by an interlocal agreement between Escambia County and the city of Pensacola to maintain a Fair Housing Office, which is required by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) for local governments to receive HUD funds.

Its purpose was to assist and resolve employment and fair housing discrimination complaints.

Per ordinance, HRC is composed of seven voting members; four members appointed by the county board and three members appointed by the city of Pensacola.

In 2018, the clerk's office recommended HRC be defunded and abolished. A clerk's office audit showed it had distributed "community relations" dollars to friends and family members, ignored statutorily mandated reporting and transparency obligations, and resolved just a handful of complaints.

Commissioner Lumon May fought to save HRC at the time saying it was important to the African American community and helped drive community relations events like the annual MLK, Jr. Parade.

He also agreed it needed more oversight and HRC was then reorganized.

Escambia Pensacola Human Relations Commission dissolved, renamed

Childers found that in 2019, the Escambia-Pensacola Human Relations Commission was dissolved and it was replaced with a new, not-for-profit funded through the county's general fund budget.

State records show the new entity was created by Escambia Commissioner Lumon May at the same time. It was called the Escambia County Human Relations Commission, which listed the same address as the original HRC, and listed him as president.

Childers said records show that entity also did business under the "fictitious name" Escambia Pensacola Human Relations Commission.

"It appears the county spent resources to reestablish EPHRC governmental unit on paper only to dissolve it and then help create a private not-for-profit corporation that operates under a very similar name," Childers said. "None of this is memorialized in the County's Code of Ordinances."

In 2020, county records show commissioners voted to amend the county's ordinances that reestablished the governmental unit named Escambia-Pensacola Human Relations Commission and change the name to Escambia County Human Relations Commission.

The motion was made by then Commissioner Jeff Bergosh and seconded by May.

HRC previously under microscope: Human Rights Commission to be reorganized after scathing report

Childers pointed out to county leaders that there is no reference in the modification that Escambia County Human Relations Commission was operating as a corporate not-for-profit entity or that the EPHRC governmental unit-special district was dissolved in 2019.

May said the county legal department was involved in the process and he doesn't believe the board did anything wrong.

"That was all passed by legal," May said. "When this board was created we had a county attorney at every meeting. It was created as a not-for-profit. That's like saying the county doesn't fund Visit (Pensacola) or FloridaWest (Economic Development Alliance). I mean they fund nonprofits all the time. Human Relations have been funded for over 50 plus years."

However, as a not-for-profit, Childers said the clerk's office has less oversight and control over how money given to the organization is spent.

Clerk Pam Childers' recommendations from HRC audit

Childers recommended that appropriations for not-for-profit entities "be presented with transparency," because unlike other not-for-profits supported by the county, appropriations for HRC are currently comingled with a county departmental budget.

"As for oversight, from my limited review of HRC, it is as though the county has taken a 'hands off' approach," Childers wrote. "Based upon the county's response it is clear the county knew in 2019 that the Escambia County Human Relations Commission incorporated as a not-for-profit. Yet, when I pointed out the not-for-profit status in my February 5th correspondence, the county quickly acknowledged that incorporation served no purpose."

Childers also questioned what HRC had to show for the government funding investment.

She said that some of the tasks the organization lists as accomplishments are not in line with the group's mission, like participating in numerous employee trainings, code enforcement meetings, various symposiums, or supporting programs like Family Fun Day or Escambia County's Summer Youth Employment Program.

"I have seen no records to indicate that the County has exercised oversight on these matters or even cared to inquire whether the services provided were adequate or needed," Childers said. "A cursory review shows that a substantial portion the \$329,119 in governmental funding received by HRC is spent on items unrelated to the actual resolution of fair housing complaints."

Executive Director of Escambia Pensacola HRC Al Henderson said the organization was handed to him as not-for-profit and he didn't learn until recently HRC was supposed to be operating like a special district.

He said he provides quarterly reports of what HRC does and the county has been aware of what they do and how the entity has evolved this whole time.

He said he is proud of the work they do and would have liked the opportunity to address any concerns before the entity is dissolved.

"We are a not-for-profit," Henderson said. "We do address fair housing, we do address discrimination, but with that comes a host of things under community relations that we have had the opportunity to address. I do have statistics and reports and outcomes and metrics, I think they're great, but of course, the funders are the ultimate ones."

Childers points out that other counties, like Santa Rosa County, accomplish fair housing enforcement without delegating the duties to another entity.

What led to clerk's review of Escambia Pensacola HRC?

Moreno said the decision was made after the clerk's recent audit of the HRC.

Childers took a closer look at the Escambia Pensacola HRC after the News Journal reported last fall that its members had created a separate not-for-profit organization, HRC Affordable Housing Solutions Inc., to secure a contract with Escambia County to sell county-constructed affordable homes.

The entities also use the same county-owned building as their Pensacola address, 150 West Maxwell St., but the only signage for the office is for BRACE.

State business records showed Henderson was listed as the registered agent for the newly-created not-for-profit and HRC officers Randy Bricker and Harold Griffin Jr. also served as officers for HRC Affordable Housing Solutions.

Members of the Escambia Pensacola HRC are appointed by the board.

Selling county-built houses: Affordable homes built by Escambia County sitting empty during housing crisis. Here's why:

May's name was not listed on state business records for HRC Affordable Housing Solutions, but according to the state of Florida's sunbiz.org business entity index,

he was listed as the board chairman of a different but similarly named not-for-profit, HRC Housing and Development, Inc., in which Henderson, Bricker and Griffin were also listed as officers.

That organization was dissolved about a week before HRC Affordable Housing Solutions Inc. was launched, without the commissioner listed as an officer.

The contract to sell 14 county-built homes was awarded to Pensacola Habitat for Humanity, but county leaders say the move was concerning.

"They put some little group together and submitted it, but it was a last-minute thing and some of the players involved were just cause for concern," Escambia County Administrator Wes Moreno said. "That's what initially raised the red flag not only with the clerk, but with us as well. Who is this group? What are they doing? They just formed this LLC at the last minute, and it just seemed a little off kilter."

Childers wrote in her letter to county leaders that before agreeing to dissolve the entity, the county offered to remove May as president, amend HRC's funding agreements to remove "Inc." from the entity's name, and address other similarly named not-for-profits that are using county property for their operations.

May says he will not contest dissolving HRC, but believes the organization did good work and has outlived its intended purpose.

This article originally appeared on Pensacola News Journal: Escambia Pensacola Human Relations Commission to dissolve after audit

Pensacola News Journal

New not-for-profit with ties to commissioner makes bid to sell Escambia County built homes

Mollye Barrows, Pensacola News Journal

Fri, November 1, 2024 at 4:13 AM CDT

9 min read

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Escambia County's search is underway for a non-profit organization to help it sell county-constructed homes built to meet the need for affordable housing. It has been narrowed down to two organizations Pensacola Habitat for Humanity and HRC-Affordable Housing Solutions, Inc., a new not-for-profit that was recently created and has connections to Escambia County Commissioner Lumon May.

Escambia County has built 17 houses to "assist with the affordable housing crisis." The county says most of the homes are complete or near completion, but they are sitting empty because the government entity is not legally allowed to sell them.

The deadline to submit a proposal was Oct. 21 and Pensacola Habitat for Humanity and HRC Affordable Housing Solutions are on the vendor selection short list.

Who is bidding to sell county owned homes

Pensacola Habitat for Humanity is a non-profit that has built over 1,650 homes in Escambia and Santa Rosa counties since 1981. It's part of a global nonprofit organization that helps people build affordable houses and improve their homes through various programs.

Future homeowners work with volunteers to build their homes and pay an affordable mortgage.

HRC Affordable Housing Solutions, Inc. (HRC) is a not-for-profit that registered with the state of Florida on Oct. 9, 2024, according to Sunbiz.org, Florida's Division of Corporations website.

In the electronic articles filed for the incorporation, HRC Affordable Housing Solutions, Inc. says its specific purpose is to "provide affordable housing to low- and moderate-income persons. Collaborate in the funding, production, promotion, and selling of affordable housing, provide housing counseling services and use Community Housing Development Organization funds for the affordable housing process."

The registered agent is Alphonsa "Al" Henderson, who is also the Executive Director of the Escambia Pensacola Human Relations Commission (EPHRC), an organization that is focused on housing and employment discrimination prevention.

The principal address for HRC is 150 West Maxwell St. in Pensacola, the same address registered to the Escambia Pensacola Human Relations Commission. HRCs officers are Al Henderson as chair, Randy Bricker as treasurer, and Harold Griffin, Jr., secretary.

County can't sell homes: Affordable homes built by Escambia County sitting empty during housing crisis. Here's why:

Escambia's Board of County Commissioners appointed Bricker and Griffin to the Escambia Pensacola Human Relations Commission, along with Commissioner May. The three are also listed as officers for the Human Relations Commission on Sunbiz. May is president, Bricker is director, and Griffin is treasurer.

Henderson said he recently saw the RFP the county had posted and he and his partners applied because they felt it was an opportunity to help the community. Henderson said he did not have any formal conversations with Commissioner May before submitting a proposal, but that he does have real estate experience and the expertise to help people move into the affordable, county-built homes if that opportunity arises.

"We know there is a need in the community for affordable housing," Henderson said. "We see it through the work we do at the Human Relations Commission, rising rents, higher interest rates. If we can partner with the county, we just want to help if we can."

According to Sunbiz, May was also the board chairman of a different but similarly named not-for-profit, HRC Housing and Development, Inc., in which Henderson, Bricker, and Griffin are also listed as officers.

That organization filed with the state on May 6, 2024, but was dissolved on Oct. 2, about a week before HRC Affordable Housing Solutions, Inc. was launched without the commissioner listed as an officer.

A third organization, Community Enterprise Investments (CEI), also registered to submit a bid to sell the county-built homes but did not submit a proposal. The reason listed was: "Partnering with HRC Affordable Housing Solutions, Inc."

CEI is a not-for-profit focused on community and small business development, it says. Commissioner May is also listed as a board member on the organization's most recent tax filing with the IRS.

The News Journal reached out to May for comment, but there was no response by deadline.

Escambia County Public Information Officer Andrea Gibson said the selection process for the RFP is ongoing, and the selection committee is doing their due diligence to ensure a fair process.

"As is standard with any county RFP, we are reviewing potential conflicts of interest as part of this selection process," Gibson said. "The county received two submittals for the infill housing RFP. Since a shortlist typically consists of three or fewer applicants, both submittals were shortlisted in this case. We are committed to ensuring a fair selection process to find the best partner who will help connect our residents with these affordable housing opportunities."

What Escambia County wants the successful bidder to do

Escambia County issued a request for proposal (RFP) on Sept. 19 for obtaining professional services pertaining to selling infill residential houses, it said.

The RFP is on the county's website and says it's to establish an agreement with one or more qualified not-for-profit and/or other governmental agencies or organizations to sell residential houses constructed through Escambia County's Infill Housing program(s).

Housing money runs low: Questions linger as Escambia seeks partner to sell 17 county-built affordable homes

The homes must be sold to families making less than 80% Area Median Income. The county indicated on the Question & Answer page of the RFP that it may have some involvement in who is considered for buying the homes.

In response to a question asking if there is a current list available of potential buyers for the infill program, the county responded: "While there is not a list of qualified buyers, we do have several lists of interested parties from past county presentations that we will provide and would expect our partner to reach out to."

A selection review committee made up of five county employees evaluated the two organizations in the initial review. According to the county, the criteria used in evaluating the proposals includes qualifications, experience, size of operations that can be committed to title work, reputation, references, judgment of timeliness and quality of prior work, if any, for the county.

Human Relations Commission dissolves

County leaders create new position to cover some of office's functions

Mollye Barrows

Pensacola News Journal USA TODAY NETWORK – FLORIDA

More than 50 years after it was established, the Escambia-Pensacola Human Relations Commission (HRC) is now dissolved.



The Escambia-Pensacola Human Relations Commission dissolved Dec. 31, 2025. TONY GIBERSON/PENSACOLA NEWS JOURNAL

Established in 1974, the HRC's purpose was to review and resolve employment and fair housing complaints and to "improve community relations for all persons in Escambia County."

The dissolution process has been ongoing since Escambia County Commissioners voted six months ago to let the organization sunset on Dec. 31, 2025, and now that it's official a new, full-time county position will partially take HRC's place.

After some public pushback to the county's decision earlier this year to dissolve HRC, Escambia leaders created the Senior Development Program Manager position, at a salary of \$80,000 a year, to provide similar services for handling housing and employment discrimination complaints.

Escambia County Administrator Wes Moreno says HRC Executive Director Al Henderson will serve in the new position starting Jan. 12 under Escambia's Neighborhood & Human Services division, which focuses on improving residents' quality of life by addressing a variety of housing needs and fostering community engagement.

"One of the reasons I thought he was a good choice is because he's familiar with the community and familiar with the community partners familiar with him, which is important," Moreno said. "He'll be doing those same duties at HRC in-house for us and probably

taking on some additional duties we'll work out as we bring him on board."

The News Journal reached out to Henderson for comment on the new position and dissolution of HRC which he has led for years, but messages were not returned by deadline.

Moreno says he expects the county will keep Escambia-Pensacola Human Relations' website and current phone number active because people are familiar with their contact information and the site has "a lot of good information."

People will also be directed to the county's website if they have a housing or employment discrimination complaint, and the county says the senior development program manager will provide the personal connection.

Longtime local civil rights activist Ellison Bennett is glad to see Henderson in the new role, but he is still disappointed over the dissolution of HRC.

As a Vietnam veteran and someone who experienced the tumultuousness of the American Civil Rights Era, which changed laws and ended legalized segregation, discrimination and disenfranchisement, Bennett and others who previously spoke to the board believe many of those issues still exist today.

"The Human Relations Commission was doing very good toward all people in the Escambia County, especially when it came to housing discrimination, fair wages, and if someone had a complaint, they had the opportunity to go say, 'Hey, I feel like I have been slighted or mistreated.' I just think you do not take the human element out of listening to people, whether they are right or wrong."

Bennett and others who spoke to the board say organizations like HRC provide a vital human connection for those most vulnerable to abuse and injustice.

They say that connection is especially important to the "least of these" who often struggle to survive issues like homelessness, poverty or living on a fixed income.

"I think we as people should show more compassion and love for one another," Bennett said. "I've always spoke out against injustice because we cannot be of the mindset, 'Well, it's not me and my family, so I don't care.' I just hope in this new year that people would give Al Henderson an opportunity to do his job."

Why Escambia dissolved HRC

The Board of County Commissioners initially voted in June 2025 to sunset the government-funded organization at the end of September 2025.

However, after more than a dozen people spoke out against dissolving the HRC at the meeting, the board rescinded its vote and instead agreed to give Moreno until Dec. 31 to create one fulltime position to handle the responsibilities of HRC's executive director.

HRC received about \$320,000 annually in governmental funding, with around 60% coming from Escambia County and the remainder paid by the city of Pensacola to address discrimination and fair housing complaints, which is required by the federal government.

The city of Pensacola also decided in 2025 to end the joint agreement it had with the county to support HRC.

Escambia County moved to dissolve the organization after Clerk of Court Pam Childers concluded in an audit that HRC was operating as a county funded not-for-profit, but it was not a transparent arrangement, and it appeared to have little to no oversight.

She recommended the county "eliminate the unnecessary and frivolous spending" involved in the program.

The same recommendation was made in 2018 when a clerk's office audit showed the organization had distributed "community relations" dollars to friends and family members, ignored statutorily-mandated reporting and transparency obligations, and resolved just a handful of complaints.

HRC was reorganized and supporters say audits show they are making a difference in the community and giving the county a good return on its investment, but the board determined the county could provide the same services in-house.

Childers recommended the same services could be legally provided through Escambia County's Neighborhood Services Department.

Escambia County Commissioner Lumon May was among those who protested dissolving the organization.

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