

BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS  
SERVING AS THE BOARD OF ADJUSTMENTS  
UNION COUNTY, FLORIDA  
PUBLIC HEARING  
JULY 21, 2025

NOTE: If any person decides to appeal any decision made with respect to any matter considered at this meeting or hearing, he or she will need a record of the proceedings and may need to ensure that a verbatim record is made.

PRESIDING: Channing Dobbs, Chair

RECORDING: Reagan E. Robinson, Deputy Clerk

ATTENDING: Commissioner Mac Johns; Commissioner Donna Jackson; Commissioner Melissa McNeal; Commissioner Willie Croft; Kellie Hendricks Rhoades, Clerk of Courts & Comptroller; Russell A. Wade III, County Attorney; Pamela Woodington; Finance Director; Jimmy Williams, County Coordinator

**MEETING CALLED TO ORDER**

Chairman Dobbs called the meeting to order at 5:45 P.M.

**INVOCATION AND PLEDGE**

Commissioner Jackson offered the invocation and led the Pledge of Allegiance.

**ADOPTION OF THE AGENDA**

**Commissioner McNeal moved to adopt the agenda. Commissioner Jackson seconded the motion, and it passed unanimously.**

**CONSIDERATION OF A SPECIAL EXCEPTION PETITION, SE 25-01, PROVIDING FOR A SPECIAL EXCEPTION TO PERMITTED USES WITHIN A RESIDENTIAL, RURAL (RR) ZONING DISTRICT, BY JR DAVIS ACQUISITIONS, LLC**

Chair Dobbs read the header. Garrett Milton, owner of Archer-Milton Funeral Home, opened by noting that the Board of Adjustments is a quasi-judicial board and shall not consider outside opinions when making their decisions. He then shared a presentation which provided an overview of his proposed crematory ~~business~~ and addressed the rumors surrounding the proposal. He explained that it will solely be used for in-house services (no soliciting or commercial use) and that from the outside, it will appear to be just a metal building with a retort. He then addressed all noise, odor, smoke, property value and health concerns by providing visual evidence of crematoriums in surrounding counties, as well as studies done by the EPA and other agencies. Milton suggested there is a need for cremations within the County. He stated that the cremation rate in Florida is 69% and that Union County's rate is on par with that average. He shared that he picked the parcel of land in question on Little Springs Road specifically for its proximity to natural gas, noting that it is one of only a few places in the county where this is the case. He also noted there are no homes within 500 feet of the southeast corner of the property, where they plan to build. He went on to offer that it would generate property tax and gas sales revenue, create new jobs and bring people into the community who will spend money at other local businesses. Commissioner Jackson asked him how long it would take for them to realize the benefit from this endeavor. He responded stating that he is not looking to make money, rather save community members an estimated \$100-150 per cremation. He then shared that it would take him roughly five to seven years to recoup his investment.

**PUBLIC COMMENTS IN FAVOR OF**

Hearing no requests to speak, Chair Dobbs closed the floor to public comments in favor of the special exception.

**PUBLIC COMMENTS OPPOSED TO**

Mr. Woody Lane thanked Mr. Milton and his staff for the amazing job they did when assisting his family in their time of need. He stated that he is not against the crematorium, rather he is against having it placed in a residential neighborhood. Mr. Lane noted that this is a precedent he does not want to set in Union County. He referenced back to when Mr. Milton stated the crematory would only run two days a week and noted that in all reality the funeral business is 24/7. He went on to detail how he imagines the process would be and how it would impact the surrounding community.

Mr. Trey Tucker thanked the Board for reviewing the effects and Archer-Milton Funeral Home for their service to the community. He stated that the decisions made now have consequences that will affect others long after the people making the decisions are gone. He addressed both health and public safety concerns and noted that crematoriums are not regulated by yearly state inspections.

Mrs. Gioia Hesler, who lives in front of the property, noted that Archer-Milton Funeral Home has done a great service to the community and this is taking away from it. She expressed concerns about long-term exposure for those who regularly utilize the residential area, especially babies and children. She then posed the question, "What is it really doing for our community?" She noted there are other solutions, as well as the falsities she felt were presented by Archer-Milton Funeral Home.

Mr. Stephen Drawdry, who lives within 100 feet of the property, voiced his strong opposition to the crematorium. He emphasized that he has lived in the area for 27 years and considers it his home. He stated that he never thought there would be a commercial building burning bodies in his front yard. He noted how disgusting it is that he has no power to decide what happens in his life. He implored that it be placed elsewhere. Mr. Drawdry closed by stating that this situation is not right and a stain on the County.

Mrs. Jessica Drawdry, who lives directly across from the proposed site, shared that she asked AI about the negative health effects of a crematorium and it informed her that long-term exposure has many. She addressed the loss in property value surrounding the area. She then shared that she approached Mr. Milton after the last meeting and was blown off. Mrs. Drawdry closed by stating that it takes more natural gas than propane to burn bodies.

Mr. Stephen Hesler stated that this crematorium has been in the works for years, not two months like said at the previous meeting. He then probed if Mr. Milton lied about little things like this, what else is he going to lie about? He noted that the proposed site is not the place to build the crematorium and requested that it be built elsewhere. He raised concern over human health, emissions and children's safety. He stated that, at this point, he would prefer the 14 houses that could be placed on the land instead. Mr. Hesler noted that he doesn't want to be in Gainesville or Starke, which are the examples used by Mr. Milton in his presentation. He closed by stating that the Board was elected to take care of the working man.

Mrs. Debbie Asbury shared that she has been going to speech therapy just to be able to address the Board. She noted her concern of how this could negatively affect her own health issues, as well as the well-being of her grandchildren. She implored the Board to vote no for the health of all. She closed by stating that Mr. Milton's previous presentation was full of untruths.

Hearing no further requests to speak, Chair Dobbs closed the floor to public comments opposed to the special exception.

### **BOARD DISCUSSION AND ACTION**

Chair Dobbs thanked everyone for maintaining a level of professionalism throughout public comments and called for discussion from the Board.

Commissioner Johns stated that he has been against the crematorium from the beginning. He noted that he has to look at this as doing his job. He shared that he gets along with everyone who lives down Little Springs Road and they are every day, common working-class people. Commissioner Johns stated that he has known Mr. Milton since he moved here and knows he does a great job but expressed that this crematorium would impose on the lives that these people have worked to build for themselves. Directed toward Mr. Milton and his previous statement regarding "quasi-judicial", Commissioner Johns noted that he didn't like his comment and that he is aware of the role he plays in his position. He asked if the crematorium would benefit the County and decided that it benefited the business owner more. He asked that Mr. Milton not impose on people just because of the gas line. Mr. Milton responded stating that \$100 is a lot for the working man and that this crematorium will save these very people that money, along with the rest of Union County citizens.

Commissioner McNeal stated that she has a few questions to ask Mr. Milton. She started by noting the great amount of research she had conducted on the matter. She noted that mercury is her greatest concern because it is not regulated by the state. She proposed filter and soil testing exploration before she would consider saying yes. She explained that the Board cannot base their decision because of fear of what may happen one way or the other and that her concern is for the long-term health of the County. Mr. Milton noted while evidence today shows no concern about mercury output harming anyone that soil testing is a good idea and is open to this additional regulation by the county.

Commissioner Jackson stated that this is an agonizing decision with conflicting viewpoints. She noted that she doesn't see the health concerns and knows the need for a crematorium but is concerned about the location being in the area of a neighborhood. Upon reading the resolution itself, she doesn't believe the crematorium is "compatible with the surrounding properties" which is in the text of the resolution itself. Mr. Milton responded, stating that this is the reason it is a special exception permit. Commissioner Jackson provided an example of a family who had an acre of their land rezoned for her cosmetology business, which was compatible with the area. She shared that, at the end of the day, it is a judgement call.

Mr. Milton stated that he understood but asked how the quasi-judicial standard plays along with compatibility. Attorney Wade pointed Commissioner Jackson to the "relevant factors" section of the resolution when considering the decision and its possible impacts, which are part of what the judge would consider if the Board's ruling was appealed to the court. Discussion delved further into the idea of compatibility and examples of other businesses in the area. Commissioner Jackson went on to state that incompatibility is the nature of a business that would disrupt the feel of the neighborhood.

Commissioner McNeal inquired into the options for handling this item of business. Attorney Wade stated that the Board can either approve, deny or lay the item on the table. Commissioner McNeal explained that she doesn't feel comfortable herself making a motion at this time. She noted that she wants to make sure that due diligence

is done for both sides. Commissioner Jackson stated that she would wholly support Commissioner McNeal in this decision because this is in her district and wants her to feel comfortable in her decision. Commissioner McNeal shared that while she does not want to delay this decision, she heard everyone's concerns and would like to find mitigation if there is any. Chair Dobbs noted that tabling this won't make the situation any easier. He suggested that the Board go ahead and vote on it. **Commissioner Johns moved to deny Special Exception Permit, SE 25-01. The motion died due to lack of a second.**

Commissioner Jackson stated that she would like to allow Commissioner McNeal time to make a comfortable decision. Commissioner McNeal noted that she would not like to wait until the next regular meeting. **Commissioner Jackson moved to table the decision on Special Exception Permit, SE 25-01, to be reconsidered on August 4, 2025 at 5:30 p.m. Commissioner Croft seconded the motion, and it passed unanimously.**

Seeing no further business, Chair Dobbs adjourned the meeting by general consent at 7:15 P.M.

*Adopted by vote of the Board of County Commissioners on August 18, 2025.*