

BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS
UNION COUNTY, FLORIDA
BOARD OF ADJUSTMENTS PUBLIC HEARING
AUGUST 4, 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: Rita Gracki, Deputy Clerk

ATTENDING:

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| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Commissioner Willie Croft | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Kellie Hendricks Rhoades, Clerk of Courts & Comptroller |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Commissioner Channing Dobbs | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Russell A. Wade III, County Attorney |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Commissioner Donna Jackson | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Jimmy Williams, County Coordinator |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Commissioner Mac Johns | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Pamela Woodington, Finance Director |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Commissioner Melissa McNeal | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Dianne Hannon, Board Secretary |

MEETING CALLED TO ORDER

Chair Dobbs called the meeting to order at 5:34 p.m. and reconvened discussion from the July 21, 2025 meeting.

INVOCATION AND PLEDGE

Commissioner McNeal offered the prayer and led the Pledge of Allegiance.

ADOPTION OF AGENDA

Commissioner Jackson moved to adopt the agenda. Commissioner Croft 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

Attorney Wade read the header of Resolution BA SE 25-01.

Garrett Milton, owner of Archer-Milton Funeral Home, provided a slide show to discuss the crematory and lawsuits. Mr. Milton also thanked Mr. Lane and Mr. Tucker for their conduct after the meeting on July 21, 2025. He discussed the lack of a requirement to place signage outside of the proposed building and clarified that there was no DOC contract, as had been brought up in previous discussions. The funeral home only transported inmates to the medical examiner's office. It was stated the funeral home owned a pet crematory, but Mr. Milton confirmed there was none.

He explained that he had considered opening a crematory for years and that a recent situation had prompted him to move forward in order to allow a more controlled environment. He continued to address rumors and discussions from previous meetings. Concerning body storage, Mr. Milton confirmed there would be storage at the crematory but explained that a cooler already existed in his current building. He noted that the business operated 24/7 but clarified that the crematory would not run continuously and would only operate when a medical facility released a body.

Regarding property values, Mr. Milton showed examples in his slide presentation of properties that sold well near a crematory with no impact on value. He addressed health concerns, stating that credible sources confirmed crematories posed no environmental or health hazards. He explained that the crematory would benefit his business by eliminating the need to outsource cremations, and it would benefit the county through local tax revenue.

Mr. Milton displayed the County's Future Land Use map and indicated that the area around Little Springs Rd was designated as an "Urban Development Area," which included agricultural, residential, commercial, and industrial uses. He noted nearby businesses such as a sawmill, packing shed, gas company, tire yard, and home-based businesses on Little Springs Rd.

PUBLIC COMMENTS

Chair Dobbs opened comments in favor of adopting SE 25-01, and hearing none, he closed the floor to public comments in favor of.

Chair Dobbs called for public comments opposed to adopting SE 25-01, and heard from the following people:

Michael Thornton – Owns property near the proposed location. Researched property values on homes near a crematory and in 2025 it shows a decrease of 12%. Forest Meadows in Gainesville has closed. States citizens complained of odor in the area due to being in operation.

Woody Lane – Concerns with security of the area due to increased traffic, no road repairs planned for the next 5 years.

Gioia Hessler – Majority of businesses are on 121 and road is not compatible for increased traffic.

William Trey Tucker – Studies have not been made for "no risk" to health. Wants concerns for residents to take precedence over business.

Stephen Drawdy – Neighborhood does not want the crematory there with no issues of businesses or metal buildings.

Steven Hessler – Crematories not approved by Clean Air Act and government has declared bodies as solid waste. Doesn't think Board understands what this would do to residents on Little Springs Rd.

Erica Bronner – Did her own research on crematories. Contacted a crematory to get information on smokestack and that crematory has not been in business for over a year due to owner having cancer.

Jack Asbury – Does not want crematory in neighborhood. Wants Board to consider all the information and research by citizens.

Kasen Junior – Wants consideration of what the residents have said today.

Hearing no further requests to speak Chair Dobbs closed the floor to public comments.

BOARD DISCUSSION AND ACTION

Commissioner Dobbs asked if the Board had questions for the applicant or attorney.

Commissioner Jackson requested more information about the DUDA from Attorney Wade. She noted she had gathered the same information as Mr. Milton and Mr. Williams, explaining that the Urban Development designation was intended to prevent sprawl. She added that rezoning Mr. Davis's land reduced the number of homes that could be built or purchased on lots.

Attorney Wade stated that density had not been an issue in Union County, where smaller lots were allowed. He noted that the change would have permitted the crematory in a lower-density area.

Commissioner Jackson emphasized that just because a business was allowable did not mean it was prudent, especially in a residential area. She pointed out that home-based businesses were allowable under state law if 50% of the work was home-based and no separate building was used.

Attorney Wade confirmed the DUDA designation encouraged higher density but agreed that allowance did not necessarily mean suitability, since traffic and property value concerns remained.

Commissioner Jackson noted the meeting had been postponed to allow Commissioner McNeal to conduct more research and wanted to hear her findings.

Commissioner McNeal apologized for the postponement. She explained that the delay had been to study the special exception assignment, not crematories specifically. She acknowledged that any decision would leave some citizens dissatisfied. She said she better understood the DUDA after hearing Commissioner Jackson and Attorney Wade's explanations. Her main concern was road impact, not health, emotions, or proximity. She confirmed that planning for improvements to Little Springs Rd might begin within a year. She recognized Mr. Davis and Mr. Milton's good intentions and the need for revenue but suggested adding specifications such as operating hours between 7 a.m. and 7 p.m., more streetlights, and soil/EPA testing.

Commissioner Croft stated he had observed a crematory in service and had not seen issues.

Commissioner Johns said no matter the outcome, someone would be upset. He opposed placing a crematory in a residential area unless it was clearly in the county's best interest. He asked citizens to respect the process regardless of the decision.

Commissioner Dobbs noted the difficulty of such decisions, including threats he had personally received. He stated that health concerns alone were insufficient to justify denial, and while citizens opposed the crematory, some were afraid to speak in favor. He said crematories had been shut down elsewhere due to operational issues and pledged to base his decision on what was best for the county.

Commissioner Johns moved to deny BA SE 25-01, but the motion died for lack of a second.

Commissioner Croft moved to approve BA SE 25-01, but the motion also died for lack of a second.

Commissioner McNeal clarified that a second did not indicate support but could allow more discussion.

Commissioner Dobbs asked Attorney Wade for guidance, and Attorney Wade explained that the Board still had the option to approve or deny.

Commissioner Johns moved again to deny BA SE 25-01, and Commissioner Jackson seconded.

Commissioner McNeal stated that with different road construction timelines, her decision might have been different.

Commissioner Jackson said she may have voted differently on earlier rezoning had she realized the land was in the Urban Development Area. She maintained the area was intended for high-density growth.

Commissioner McNeal reiterated her commitment to property rights and acknowledged the importance of balancing citizen concerns with facts.

Commissioner Jackson stated she did not believe crematories posed health risks and considered gas lines or Urban Development growth to be greater risks. However, she would not support the crematory within a residential community.

Chair Dobbs called for the vote. Commissioners McNeal, Jackson, and Johns voted to deny. Commissioners Croft and Dobbs voted against denial. With three in favor and two opposed, the motion carried, and BA SE 25-01 was denied by the Board.

Seeing no further business, Chair Dobbs adjourned the meeting by general consent at 7:16 PM.

Adopted by vote of the Board of County Commissioners on September 15, 2025.