RUSK COUNTY EMERGENCY SERVICES DISTRICT NO. 1
SPECIAL CALLED MEETING & STRATEGIC PLANNING WORKSHOP MINUTES

Saturday, July 11, 2026 / 9:03 a.m. / 1515 Whippoorwill Avenue, Henderson, Texas

Board Members Present	David Burks, President; Wayne Griffith, Vice President; Gloria Dooley, Secretary/Treasurer; James "Jiffy" Dukes, Assistant Treasurer; Curt Collins, Commissioner
Quorum	Present
Consultants/Presenters	Strategic planning facilitators and financial planning consultant Randy Parr; department representatives and other attendees
Record Sources	Posted agenda and meeting packet, meeting transcript, and four audio recordings

PART I - SPECIAL CALLED MEETING

1. Call to Order and Quorum. President David Burks called the Special Called Meeting to order at 9:03 a.m. A quorum of the Board of Commissioners was present.

2. Invocation and Pledge of Allegiance. The invocation was delivered by Paul Patterson, followed by the Pledge of Allegiance to the United States flag.

3. Public Comments/Announcements. The President asked whether any person wished to make a public comment or announcement. No public comments or announcements were offered.

4. Open Special Called Meeting. The Board proceeded with the posted Special Called Meeting agenda.

5. Consider and Possibly Approve Job Descriptions for District Administrator and Business Manager. The Board reviewed the revised job descriptions that had been circulated in advance. The documents were described during the meeting as the District Administrator and Business Manager job descriptions. Commissioners indicated they had reviewed the revisions and offered no additional changes.

> **Motion:** James "Jiffy" Dukes moved to approve both revised job descriptions. **Second:** Curt Collins seconded the motion. **Vote:** The motion carried unanimously by voice vote, with no opposition stated.

6. Adjourn Special Called Meeting. The President declared the Special Called Meeting adjourned and immediately opened the posted Strategic Planning Workshop.

PART II - STRATEGIC PLANNING WORKSHOP

7. Open Strategic Planning Workshop. The Strategic Planning Workshop was opened following adjournment of the Special Called Meeting. The facilitators explained that the session would review prior work, confirm the District's guiding principles, SWOT analysis and desired service levels, develop strategic initiatives and objectives, and conclude with capital and financial planning.

8. Discussion and Review of Strategic Plan

A. Planning Framework and Service-Provider Structure

Planning approach. The facilitators described the planning process as defining the environment, creating the plan, and measuring results. The plan was intended to be community-centered and District-oriented, incorporating community needs and expectations while focusing on the District's responsibilities and capabilities.

Service-provider structure. The group confirmed that the District continued to work through twelve service providers and four partner/contract providers, with no department changes identified since the prior workshop. The distinction between contracted providers and partner-provided services was retained.

B. Guiding Principles

Mission. The Board reaffirmed the mission statement: to ensure and maintain the safety of each and every firefighter in Rusk County while providing the best possible fire protection and prevention to the residents of Rusk County.

Vision. The Board refined the vision statement to emphasize providing the best possible public service and being a recognized leader in emergency services through exceptional leadership, communication, resources, and healthy, well-trained, motivated first responders. Minor grammatical corrections were directed.

Core values. The Board retained integrity, stewardship and accountability, compassion and empathy, others before self, and leading by example. The group directed that the values be formatted as separate bullet points for clarity.

Service expectation. The Board retained the expectation: "Simply put, we will deliver the best possible public service-everyone, everywhere, every time, whatever it takes."

C. SWOT Analysis

Strengths

- Modern and updated equipment and an ongoing effort to prevent the apparatus fleet from becoming outdated.
- Financial stability and the ability to meet or exceed identified operational needs.
- Strong volunteers, above-average training, and an estimated certification level of approximately 65 percent.
- A District culture that listens to departments and stakeholders.
- Strong partnerships with emergency service providers and other agencies.
- Apparatus and equipment committees that provide operational input.
- Department-level fundraising and donations.
- Department compliance with District requirements and standards.
- Recognition that non-certified volunteers remain valuable because incident scenes have useful assignments for personnel with varied training and capabilities.

Weaknesses

- Volunteer recruitment and retention.
- Inconsistent availability of volunteer staffing, particularly during weekday daytime hours.
- Extended turnout and travel times caused by the rural geography and size of the service area.
- Incomplete reporting, inventory tracking, CAD information, response heat-map data, and department responses to requests for information and data.
- Lack of current and regularly updated department SOPs across portions of the system.
- Inconsistency and delay in fire/EMS dispatching, including incomplete information, differences in dispatch criteria, and limited District control over law-enforcement-based dispatch operations.
- Limitations and dissatisfaction associated with the new NERIS reporting system and its fit for rural operations.

Opportunities

- Responder incentive programs, including paid-on-call options, stipends, and a Length of Service Awards Program (LOSAP).
- Expanded in-house firefighter and EMS training
- Improved response mapping, hydrant mapping, water-source mapping, and use of RMS/mobile technology.
- Development of quick-response stations in four geographic quadrants, staffed initially during weekday daytime hours.
- Future paid staffing structured to sustain and supplement, rather than replace, volunteer departments.
- Improved countywide inventory and maintenance data through Alpine/RMS tools.
- Long-term consideration of mobile data capability and improved direct access to CAD, mapping, and water-source information.

Threats and Concerns

- Sustained funding and future legislative limits on property-tax or sales-tax revenue.
- Unfunded legislative and regulatory mandates.
- Loss or reduction of volunteer participation.
- Potential reductions in training support.
- Population growth, housing development, industrial development, solar farms, battery-energy storage facilities, and data centers that may increase service demand and water needs.

- Inadequate water supply, limited hydrant flow, and difficulties coordinating with some water-supply corporations.
- Changing firefighter PPE, contamination-control, inspection, and certification requirements that may impose significant rural costs.
- Public scrutiny, open-records activity, and the need for continued financial transparency.

D. Critical Issues and Organizational Culture

Critical issues. The facilitators defined a critical issue as one that could cause significant harm if not addressed within approximately ninety days. The Board did not identify an immediate financial or operational crisis. However, the group agreed to identify daytime volunteer availability and primary-department non-response as a critical concern for continued planning, particularly in the southern portion of the county.

Primary department non-response. The group clarified that some primary departments occasionally fail to respond, after which dispatch continues paging neighboring departments. The Board was not aware of calls receiving no response from any department, but acknowledged that delayed secondary or tertiary response remains a concern.

Sacred cows. The facilitators asked whether any known issues were being intentionally avoided. Commissioners and department representatives did not identify any such issue and stated that operational concerns are generally raised openly or privately with Commissioners.

E. Desired Levels of Service

Service scope. The group reaffirmed that services would continue to be delivered through the existing department structure. Specialized marine capability was not identified as a separate District requirement, but rising-water and swift-water capability remained desirable. Hazardous-material response should be maintained at awareness and operations levels, with technician-level incidents relying on outside resources.

EMS first response. The current desired level remained Emergency Medical Responder (EMR) first-response capability. The Board acknowledged that some responders are EMTs or paramedics, but departments presently operate at the EMR level. Advanced life support response was discussed as a possible long-term goal if future paid staffing includes qualified paramedics and the District obtains the necessary authority and licensing.

Current staffing. The workshop estimated weekday staffing in some areas at zero to three available responders, particularly on the south end, with approximately four to five available on weekends. The group discussed two- to three-person staffing as a practical initial target for future quick-response stations.

Response times. The group discussed estimated call-handling times ranging from approximately ninety seconds to six minutes, averaging near three minutes; volunteer turnout time of approximately ten minutes; and average travel time near eighteen minutes. A previously listed thirty-four-minute maximum was questioned and identified for refinement.

Response goal. The Board discussed establishing, a measurable goal of the first-arriving unit being on scene within twenty-five minutes at least seventy-five percent of the time for critical calls. The group emphasized that this would be a District goal, not an adopted NFPA standard.

Call handling. A proposed objective was to reduce call-handling time to two minutes or less. Because dispatch is not under direct District control, this was characterized as a mid-term objective requiring interagency coordination.

Turnout and travel. The group considered maintaining a ten-minute turnout objective and an eighteen-minute average travel objective as ongoing measures until staffing and station deployment improve.

Missed calls. The term "missed calls" was rejected as inaccurate. The preferred measure is "no response by the primary department," because neighboring departments ordinarily respond after re-dispatch.

Recordkeeping. All departments are required to report through the District's RMS. The Board discussed using Alpine and related data to capture response times, non-response, fire loss, casualties, and other performance measures.

Training. Departments will continue establishing training levels, with District support for EMR/first aid, firefighter certification, rescue, swift-water, and other in-house training. The Board reaffirmed that useful incident-scene roles exist for personnel at different training levels.

SCBA and interoperability. The Board noted that recent SCBA purchases and replacement planning had substantially addressed the air-pack issue. The long-term goal remains interoperability and replacement of aging cylinders and components.

PPE. The District's PPE is expected to remain compliant with applicable standards. The group discussed dual-certified TechGen gear and the proposed five-year goal of two sets of structural PPE per firefighter. Commissioners questioned the financial practicality of universal two-set issuance but acknowledged evolving contamination-control requirements and the need for backup gear after exposure.

F. Quick-Response Quadrant Station Concept

Concept. James "Jiffy" Dukes proposed evaluating one District quick-response station in each of four geographic quadrants rather than placing paid personnel inside existing volunteer stations. Each station could initially house an engine and brush truck and dispatch simultaneously with the local volunteer department.

Purpose. The proposed District crews would supplement-not replace-the volunteer departments. If the local department had adequate resources, the quick-response unit could be released for another call. The concept was intended to reduce weekday response delays and preserve volunteer identity and participation.

Benefits discussed. Participants stated that separately located District stations could reduce friction between paid and volunteer personnel, avoid disputes over use of volunteer apparatus, provide centralized coverage for several departments, and allow two-person crews to respond immediately.

Facilities. The Board discussed the need to plan facilities for long-term use, including future living quarters, kitchen, showers, bunk space, accessibility, and regulatory requirements. Alternatives included a separate modular or residential-style building with detached apparatus bays, or a metal residential structure with a separate garage.

Cost and phasing. Participants estimated that a conventional station could approach or exceed $800,000 to $1 million, depending on site acquisition and construction. The concept was placed in the long-range portion of the plan and would require land acquisition, financing analysis, job descriptions, staffing standards, equipment, and legal review.

Volunteer input. Department representatives present generally supported the concept because the stations could be centrally located and could add a fourth responding unit to existing multi-department structure-fire dispatches.

EMS housing. The Board distinguished fire-response planning from EMS housing. Commissioners noted that EMS is primarily a county responsibility and cautioned against assuming county obligations. Temporary housing of ambulance crews at Mount Enterprise and Carlisle stations was discussed, including insurance and facility requirements.

G. Dispatch and Communications

Dispatch limitations. The Board discussed inconsistent fire and EMS dispatch information, delayed notification, varying call criteria, and incomplete information being passed to responding departments. Law-enforcement dispatchers provide fire dispatch as a secondary responsibility, which can delay fire/EMS notifications during busy law-enforcement activity.

Training offers. The District had previously offered to fund fire-dispatch training for county dispatchers, but the offer was not accepted. The Board discussed renewing the discussion with the current Sheriff.

Dedicated fire dispatch. A separate fire dispatch center or dedicated daytime fire dispatcher was discussed. Estimated personnel costs alone could range from approximately one-half million dollars to $1 million annually, before equipment, licensing, security, and certification requirements.

Combined dispatch. A joint City of Henderson/Rusk County communications center was identified as a potentially more efficient long-term solution because it could support a dedicated fire dispatcher, though participants acknowledged institutional challenges.

Mapping and mobile data. The group discussed countywide hydrant and water-source mapping, department responsibility for entering and validating information, and possible mobile data access. Existing applications provide some functionality, but their usefulness depends on complete and accurate department-entered data.

I. Strategic Priorities and Desired Outcomes

Strategic priorities. The Board reviewed and generally accepted five major priorities: improve community outcomes; take care of the District's people; attain financial stability and transparency; excel at internal work processes; and build and sustain capacity.

Improve community outcomes. Goals included competent and timely response, quick-response station staffing, improved water supply, and reduced community risk.

Take care of our people. Goals included recruiting and retaining the best available volunteers, building expectations of excellence, providing responder incentives, and expanding in-house training.

Financial stability and transparency. Goals included strong financial expectations and structure, optimized resource alignment, optimized procurement practices, inventory control, and reducing the effects of unfunded mandates.

Internal work processes. Goals included emphasizing safety, assuring regulatory compliance, developing and refining SOPs, and improving reporting.

Build and sustain capacity. Goals included sustaining volunteerism and supplementing with paid staffing as needed, strategic and succession planning, professional development, and maintaining an emergency reserve.

Volunteer-first wording. The Board directed that references to establishing paid staffing be revised to emphasize sustaining volunteerism and supplementing it with paid staffing as needed. Commissioners wanted the strategic plan to clearly communicate that the District was not seeking to replace volunteer departments.

Certification and legal requirements. The group discussed Texas Commission on Fire Protection standards, SFFMA and TCFP certification differences, wage-and-hour classification, and other regulatory issues. The facilitators cautioned that final staffing models must be reviewed by qualified legal counsel.

I. SMART Objectives and Timelines

Planning periods. The facilitators recommended four planning categories: critical tasks within ninety days; short-term tasks within the current budget year; mid-term tasks within two budget cycles; and long-range tasks requiring more than two budget cycles.

Objective development. Because the plan contains approximately twenty goals, the facilitators recommended preparing draft objectives and timelines for Board review rather than attempting to complete every objective during the workshop. The Board supported receiving draft language for redline and revision.

Quick-response staffing objective. The desired initial staffing level was discussed as a minimum of two personnel and a preferred maximum of three at each quick-response station. Prerequisites include funding, facilities, equipment, job descriptions, compensation and benefits, hiring, and regulatory compliance. Full implementation was recognized as a five-year or longer objective.

Fire academy. The District discussed creating an in-house Rusk County ESD fire academy capable of supporting Firefighter I and II certification, while continuing EMS classes through the contracted EMS provider.

Responder incentives. The Board discussed a previously supplied incentive model requiring members to meet certification, training, meeting-attendance, and call-participation thresholds before qualifying for per-call incentives. The Board requested a clearer explanation and flow chart before considering adoption.

Inventory objective. The desired outcome was full knowledge of District-owned property and accountability for significant assets. Capital assets would continue to be tracked under CPA thresholds, while lower-value safety equipment and items with testing or expiration requirements would be tracked operationally through the RMS.

Reporting objective. The proposed desired outcome was one hundred percent department response to District reporting and data requests within the stated deadline.

Regulatory compliance. The proposed desired outcome was one hundred percent regulatory compliance. The group discussed new and evolving reporting, cybersecurity, artificial-intelligence, debt, tax-rate, and procurement requirements.

SOP objective. The Board favored creating minimum model SOPs or templates through a firefighter-led process, rather than imposing a fully uniform set without department involvement. The Firefighters Association or a committee could review department SOPs and recommend countywide minimum standards.

Succession planning. The group discussed department succession through assistant chiefs and department bylaws, as well as District succession through the county appointment process. Commissioners emphasized the need to recruit active, working Board members rather than merely filling vacancies.

Professional development. The facilitators will include leadership development and professional conference participation as objectives separate from operational firefighter training.

Emergency reserve. The Board stated that the District historically maintains at least approximately six months of operating capacity, particularly accounting for the heavy first-quarter obligations for department funding and building debt. The facilitators will recommend an appropriate reserve policy.

J. Water Supply and Community Risk

Water-supply outcome. The Board discussed a desired outcome of having an identified water source or tender-replenishment point available within approximately five minutes of an incident location. The group recognized that this would require a multi-year effort and could include hydrants, drafting sites, fill points, tenders, and above-ground storage tanks.

Tender operations. Every department was reported to have a tender, and some have two. The District plans continued replacement and rotation of tender apparatus, including an anticipated fourth replacement tender within future budget cycles.

Water-source identification. Objectives will include identifying hydrants, verified flow, drafting sites, dry hydrants, fill points, and surface-water sources; improving mapping; and coordinating with water-supply corporations.

Water-supply SOPs. The Board discussed refining structure-fire dispatch and water-supply SOPs so engines and tenders are dispatched in a manner that ensures adequate water and personnel.

Community risk reduction. The facilitators recommended identifying opportunities such as CPR training, fire-prevention programs, wildfire planning, public education, and alignment with the county hazard-mitigation plan.

K. Capital Planning and Financial Outlook

Capital plan. The facilitators recommended a ten-year internal capital plan, with no more than five years generally published as part of the strategic plan. Capital categories discussed included facilities, apparatus and other vehicles, safety equipment, tools and equipment, communications, and major capital projects.

Publication concerns. Commissioners expressed concern that publishing speculative ten-year projections could create confusion or criticism when future revenues and legislative policy are uncertain. The facilitators agreed that the public plan could be limited to five years while maintaining a longer internal planning horizon.

District budget structure. The District currently uses one adopted budget rather than separate operating and capital budgets. Property-tax revenue primarily supports operations, while sales-tax revenue supports capital expenditures. The financial presentation will be tailored to the District's existing reporting format.

Capital financing. The District generally pays cash for apparatus and capital projects. The headquarters land and building were purchased with cash, while a portion of the renovation was financed. The Board emphasized preserving reserves and avoiding unnecessary debt.

Apparatus replacement. The District purchases and replaces apparatus through a separate long-range process. At the time of the workshop, two engines, one tender, and four brush trucks were on order. The Board intends to continue rotating the fleet rather than pause purchases solely because grant funding accelerated recent replacements.

Department five-year plans. Commissioners had previously met with departments to obtain five-year needs. Because substantial Texas A&M Forest Service grant awards changed many priorities, the plans may now be outdated. The consultants agreed to provide a standardized form so each department can submit an updated five-year capital and operational plan.

New Salem station. The Board discussed the New Salem station project, which remained under construction with steel work expected to begin shortly. The District's intent was to complete the project before beginning another major station project.

Facility model. The New Salem station was described as a functional, approximately $1 million three-bay station, designed for serviceability rather than architectural appearance. Future quick-response facilities may use detached apparatus bays and modular or metal residential structures to reduce cost while meeting staffing needs.

L. Financial Information Requested

Documents for consultant. Financial consultant Randy Parr requested year-end internal financial reports for 2023, 2024, and 2025; the most current 2026 report; county tax-rate worksheets for 2023 through 2025 and the 2026 worksheet when available; District audits for 2023 through 2025; loan documents; and relevant lease information.

Purpose. The information will be used to identify valuation and revenue trends, project property-tax and sales-tax receipts, evaluate debt service and reserves, and prepare the District's financial outlook.

Grant impacts. The Board discussed how recent Texas A&M Forest Service funding substantially accelerated apparatus and equipment purchases. Three tenders and other grant-funded equipment were acquired faster than anticipated, causing budget variances but producing significant long-term value.

Legislative risks. The financial discussion included possible reductions in allowable tax growth, future limits on sales taxes, proposals affecting school property taxes, and efforts to classify ESDs as special districts. Commissioners emphasized that long-term revenue projections remain uncertain because of legislative change.

Reserve and growth. The Board stated that sales-tax authority made future paid staffing and quick-response stations financially conceivable. Without sales-tax revenue, paid staffing would likely require reducing existing department operating allocations.

M. Next Steps

Fifty-percent draft. The facilitators will prepare a substantially developed "50 percent" draft incorporating the workshop's revisions, objectives, timelines, and wording changes. The draft will be reviewed for completeness and factual accuracy before final wordsmithing.

Department input. The consultants will provide a standard department planning form. The District will seek updated department needs and five-year plans for incorporation into the District plan.

Financial analysis. The District will provide the requested financial documents and tax worksheets to the financial consultant.

Coverage and projects. Future communications planning will depend in part on final coverage results from the Laneville tower project. Capital scheduling will also depend on completion of the New Salem station.

Community survey. The Board elected not to conduct a community or department survey during development of the initial strategic plan. Survey input may be added during a future annual update once the initial plan is established.

Annual review. The strategic plan is intended to be a living document and should be reviewed and updated annually as goals, revenues, regulations, staffing, and community conditions change.

9. Adjournment

Motion to adjourn. Wayne Griffith moved to adjourn the Strategic Planning Workshop. Curt Collins seconded the motion. The motion carried unanimously by voice vote, with no opposition stated. The workshop was adjourned at the conclusion of the discussion; the exact adjournment time was not clearly stated in the available recording.

Respectfully Submitted

Gloria Dooley - Sec/Treasurer	David Burks, President
Date: ____________	Approved: ____________