



City of West Orange

City Hall
2700 Western Avenue
West Orange, TX 77630

City Council Workshop Session Meeting Minutes

Tuesday, July 8, 2025

5:15 p.m.

Council Chambers

COUNCIL MEMBERS PRESENT:

Mayor Randy Branch
Meritta Kennedy

Jay Odom
Lanie Brown

Michael Shugart, Sr.
Gail Langton

APPOINTED OFFICIALS PRESENT:

Christopher Leavins
Simmie Gibson

Jon Sherwin
David Roberts

Theresa Van Meter

OTHERS PRESENT:

Jane Branch
Simmie Gibson
Clayton Baker
James Fisette
Richard Jones
Tyler Roberts

Randal Veitch
Richard Bland
Guy Geuder
Billy Moore
Kirk Roccaforte
Chris Sowell

Sharon Thomas
David Roberts
Benjamin Tannery
Sybil Hughes
Terry Veitch
Rhonda Block

Call to Order

Mayor Branch called the workshop to order at 5:15 p.m.

Workshop Agenda

Workshop Discussion Items

- Possible formation of ESD for the Cities of West Orange and Pinehurst
- 2026 FY Proposed Budget

Mayor Branch stated that the purpose of the workshop was to discuss the formation of the ESD for the City of West Orange, Texas and to discuss the 2025/2026 fiscal year proposed budget. First on the list is the ESD for the cities of West Orange and Pinehurst. He explained that a petition had been signed by enough voting residents, and Council is now in a process of giving consent for the election to move forward. The city councils will vote upon giving consent to the Commissioners Court to be included within the ESD map. In giving consent to the Commissioners Court, they can then call a public hearing, after which time the election for November be called and the process will begin. If the voters of West Orange and Pinehurst decide that they want to vote for an ESD to be formed, then it will happen. The mayor explained that this is just a meeting to discuss all the options and the process that would occur. He then opened up the workshop for discussion. There were no questions from Council.

Mr. Sherwin laid out a map of the proposed district. He explained that it includes everything within the city limits of Pinehurst and the city limits of West Orange and also reaches out to encompass part of the industrial district. Council Member Brown asked what part of the industrial district would be included. They mayor responded that it takes in part of FM 1006 and all of Golden Triangle Polymers. Council Member Brown then asked how far down FM 1006 would it go. Mr. Sherwin responded, "Adams Bayou to Roundbunch. Bridge City's ESD boundary is Roundbunch, and that is where we start."

If passed, the tax assessed could be anywhere from \$0.01 per \$100 property valuation to \$0.10 per \$100 valuation. Asst. Chief Gibson stated that the minimum tax would be \$0.03 per \$100 valuation.

Mayor Branch added that as far as he was concerned, if it passes and an ESD is formed with adequate funds, it would have a paid staff to report to fires, which gives a more immediate response to the fires or health concerns that citizens may have.

The discussion then turned to whether or not there would be exemptions granted on these property taxes. Would homestead exemptions and/or for those over age 65 or the disabled be offered? Mr. Leavins stated that exemptions could be granted, but they are not mandatory.

Council Member Brown stated the one of her concerns is whether or not there will be enough income to support an ESD. If it is approved and created, and then there is not enough income to support it, the City Council no longer has control of the fire department at all. What would happen then? Also, where would the station be located? If it is located in Pinehurst, she added, "we're back to the same situation we have now where the response time is slow and if they have a better spot in Pinehurst for a fire station, now we don't have one in West Orange. Then we would have that wait time for them to get to us. And that's my concern." Asst. Chief Gibson responded, stating that "best case scenario – an ESD is formed. Within the first couple of years, they would have to build a minimum of two stations and hire a minimum of 18 firefighters.

Commissioner Sowell asked for the current ISO rating for West Orange. Asst. Chief Gibson responded, "4." The mayor added that, "our rating is due to the work that our fire department has done and the support that the City has given it as well."

Commissioner Roccaforte then asked if the fire department currently made medical calls. Asst. Chief Gibson responded that they do not. They only run only major medical calls when Acadian Ambulance has requested them.

Commissioner Roccaforte stated that the ESD covering Bridge City does not allow any exemptions to property values. They have two stations – one in Bridge City and one in Orangefield.

Fire Chief Roberts stated that one of the big questions that has now come up is that the proposed would have to be approved by the vote of the councils of the cities within a mile of the new ESD's ETJs. He added that there is not a mile between either West Orange or Pinehurst and the City of Orange. "So if they vote 'no,' you're done." He suggested that that be looked into. Mr. Leavins responded that he was not certain about that, but cities within the proposed district do have to consent.

The discussion then turned to whether or not a city could/would contribute funding to an ESD. Fire Chief Roberts stated that the City of Kirbyville does donate to theirs. It may only be \$20,000 or \$30,000 per year. He asked if the City of West Orange would be willing to contribute to the ESD. Mayor Branch responded, stating "I'll speak for myself. I would say yes if it's needed, yes. I think that the City and the City Council would be willing to support it as much as they can. My main issue is that if there's a fire at my house, I want somebody there as quickly as possible to squirt water on it. That's what we would get with the paid department if it all worked out and it was able to happen. The citizens of West Orange would benefit by that. Yes, there would be that extra tax. If it's 10 cents on \$100 valuation, it's \$100,000 home, then yeah, that's \$100 a year depending on whether the ESD board sets up a Homestead exemption or not, and there would even be a possibility that insurance rates could go down. "

He added that he believed the City would be more than willing to lease the present station to the ESD at a very reasonable rate. Fire Chief Roberts stated that the present station would work for the first little bit of time, but once it got staffed, you have to have day rooms, night rooms, you got to have lockers, little stuff. Firefighter Tyler Roberts stated that, in the City of Orange, the stations are 24-hour houses that are basically lived in 24/7. They have weight rooms, they have multiple fridges and they have to have a full commercial kitchen. He added that they actually need those things in order to operate on a day-to-day basis.

Mr. Dearing stated that he did not know if the individual who asked him to sign the petition was even supposed to be getting signatures. He added that "this guy isn't even involved at the city anymore. So why would he be the pushing this?" Mayor Branch responded that he didn't know, because he didn't know who he was talking about. He added that those passing around the petition got 140 good signatures. One-hundred valid signatures were needed, so we're well over the number we had to have. These signatures were approved by the Voter Registrar. He explained that they were shooting for 200 signatures, but they had about 200. However, some of them were disqualified to get down to 140.

Mrs. Hughes stated that West Orange has had a great fire department for many years. The mayor agreed, adding that "they are a great fire department. They do the best job that they can do. They take care of the equipment, they report to the fires as quickly as they can, so there's no issues with that." Asst. Chief Gibson stated that, "As it is right now, if it were to keep going

the way it is and the way I look at it, within the next five to ten years, we will end up needing paid firefighters.”

Mayor Branch stated that when hiring firefighters, you are also going to have their insurance, benefits and so forth and the list just keeps going on and on and on. “So, basically what you're saying is either we have an ESD and you pay a tax or we have a volunteer fire department or maybe a partially paid volunteer fire department, and we raise taxes because that's the way it's going to get paid for. Our next segment of this workshop is budget, and I can tell you right now from looking at it, I'm scared. I'm scared of how much money it is costing us to run the city. And we run the city on a bare staff. We don't have a whole bunch of people just running around the city to get things done.”

Council Member Odom had a question regarding taxes. He stated that earlier it had been brought up that possibly Golden Triangle Polymers would be part of this, but they have a ten-year tax abatement with the County once they get online. Would that abatement also be in effect for an ESD? Mayor Branch responded that “their abatement is through the county. So that's a separate tax. West Orange was not invited into any discussions about Golden Triangle Polymers whenever construction began. We would love to work with them. We would love to have them support the city in some way since they're right next door to us.”

Mayor Branch then stated that “I think one thing that's important to note is that this was a petition which was initiated by citizens. That is really who's making the request - these people who are on the petition. The county receives the petition, and if it qualifies, that is when the process begins to put it on the ballot.” He further explained that there is supposed to be a written notice and a request from any city that is within the corporate limits or within the proposed jurisdiction or in the ETJ of the ESD. The city provides either their consent to be included in the ESD or deny it or they could just not respond. If they consent, then the County can move forward in having a public hearing. But it gives the City the ability (if they don't consent) to provide the services in lieu of the ESD. But that's most of the City's involvement when you look at Chapter 775 of the Texas Health and Safety Code.

Asst. Chief Gibson stated, “let's say it goes through and it passes. We don't know the numbers yet, but we're going to say that y'all put the numbers out there and it's going to be able to fund itself. And it goes through, it becomes an ESD. Now, we go out there thinking that we're going to get the funding from these plants that the City covers now.” He further stated that he fully expects the industries in the new ESD to fight this...however, the City will no longer be involved in it. So, they are not going to have to worry about trying to fight for the money at the refineries, from the City of Orange and so forth. They'll fund it and if it falls, that's when it's going to be downhill from there. That's where the ESD will have to fight. Their first step should be to hire an attorney.”

Chief Roberts explained that there are rules that govern how long they can utilize a piece of equipment. There is also a point when they have to be able to rotate out bunker gear equipment which costs approximately \$10,000 per person. As far as trucks, the lifetime right now is 10 years. After 10 years, the truck is supposed to be designated as a reserve truck.

He added that the department's first engine out to a call is #1, which is the new one, and then for the secondary engine that supplies water. He then stated that the fire trucks are a lot more expensive than the city police cars, city vehicles, and other equipment except possibly the gradall. “These are specialized pieces of equipment and you have to keep that in the back of your mind.”

Firefighter Billy Moore stated, “I retired from Bridge City and they have a day crew Monday through Friday - no night coverage no weekend coverage.” He added that many of those currently working for the local ESDs are paid part-time staff because they have other jobs, which means you are often covered only by your volunteers. It is kind of a give-and-take work together type thing, but a lot of it is the same people. He explained that at a standard room content fire, you should have about 18 firemen. “For a full-blown house fire, you should have about 40 people. It takes all of us. That's why everybody in the county works so well together.”

Mayor Branch then stated that, due to the time, the workshop needed to move on to the budget. He reported that the proposed budget summary from the staff shows expenses of \$5,667,177 and total revenue of \$3,829,739. There is a quite a discrepancy in those two numbers. He has therefore asked the staff to look at their 2024 year-end totals for each line item. He has asked them to keep that number as close as possible to what they are going to propose for this year, which will bring the numbers much closer together. He is also going to reduce Capital Outlay. The City has ten different departments: Humane, Street, Parks, Police, General Administration, Court, Fire, Building Official, Sanitation and Maintenance. The biggest expense within the city

budget is payroll. This budget is preliminary. He wanted it to be presented to the City Council and let them know what he is asking each department to do and to make sure that they are being as transparent as possible with how they are managing the City.

Asst. Chief Gibson spoke up, stating that his staff is free. Mayor Branch responded, "And we appreciate it, too. We really do appreciate it. We really do appreciate what the Fire Department does. They are all volunteers. They take care of the equipment, everything from the fire truck and the hoses to the bunker gear, to the breathing air bottles, you know, all of the equipment that we got for them during the last four or five years." He added that there was a call earlier that day. "There was a fire, but it was in a backyard - trash and sticks were burning, so it made a lot of smoke, but it was not a fire that anyone had to go out and fight. I appreciate that you guys showed up in the truck for that. He spoke with one of the responders, who told him that he was "going back to bed. I got to work tonight." So that's the kind of thing that our volunteers do for us, you know, they get up in the middle of the day when they're working nights."

Mayor Branch asked if anyone on the Council had any specific questions about the budget before them. Council Member Brown responded that she had not had a chance to really look at it, as Council just received it, but that she was sure she would have questions. The mayor suggesting taking a little time to look over it. Council Member Brown asked Mr. Sherwin what equipment was shown under Capital Outlay for the Street Department. Mr. Sherwin explained that is what is used whenever they go to auctions. If they see an auction item today and the auction closes on Friday or Monday, there is not time to get approval from the Council. For example, they found a small two-yard dump truck that was in an auction, and they had two days to get it. They were low bidder, and was able to get a very good truck that's been in service for about five months now that was purchased for about \$1,000.

Mayor Branch stated that the budget the council will see, and vote on, will be quite a bit different than what they looking at now. He added that "we are really trying to be very fiscally responsible with what we have to work with, which is not a lot considering we're trying to run the entire city on it." He informed Council that when he has better numbers in the budget, he will get back with them and they will have an opportunity to go through it before it is voted on in September.

Announcements

Mayor Branch then announced that the next Council meeting was scheduled for Monday, July 14, 2025 beginning at 5:00 p.m.

Adjournment

With there being no further business before Council, Mayor Branch adjourned the meeting at 6:51 p.m.



Randy Branch, Mayor

ATTEST:



Theresa Van Meter, City Secretary

