



Louisiana Planning District 5

COMPREHENSIVE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES (CEDS)

STEERING COMMITTEE MEETING

Tuesday, May 19th, 2026, Noon

2nd Floor, East Conference Room

HENNING SEED CENTER

4310 Ryan Street, Lake Charles, LA 70605

ZOOM: <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/9583967845>

MINUTES

I. WELCOME

Mr. Jacob Dillehay

II. INTRODUCTIONS

Roundtable

Mr. Jacob Dillehay - Present
Mr. Damon Cooley - Not Present
Mr. David LaFargue - Not Present
Mr. Ben Boudreaux - Present
Mr. Therrance Chretien - Not Present
Ms. Katie Armentor - Present
Ms. Sharon Thierry - Not Present
Mr. Alberto Galan - Present
Ms. Kim Montie - Present
Ms. Carter Prejean - Present
Ms. Cesilee Oliver - Present
Mr. Gus Fontenot - Present
Ms. Jill Gilmarini - Present
Mr. Daniel Groft - Not Present
Mayor Henry Guinn - Present (Online)
Mr. Kyle Edminston - Present
Ms. April Meehleder - Present
Ms. Clair Marceaux - Present

III. CEDS OVERVIEW

Ms. Jamie Gaines
Assistant Director

Ms. Jamie Gaines opened the discussion by introducing the Southwest Louisiana Regional Planning Commission (SWLA-RPC) and explaining its role within the region. She explained that SWLA-RPC serves as the Economic Development District (EDD) for Southwest Louisiana and clarified the distinction between SWLA-RPC and the regional economic alliance. Ms.

Gaines stated that SWLA-RPC represents all five parishes in the region (Allen, Beauregard, Calcasieu, Cameron, and Jefferson Davis Parish) and serves as one of approximately 400 Economic Development Districts nationwide.

Ms. Gaines explained that SWLA-RPC represents governmental entities across Southwest Louisiana and focuses on economic and community development planning, project implementation, infrastructure programming and funding, public coordination, leveraging local government resources, public investment, and regional collaboration.

Ms. Gaines then reviewed the history of the organization. She explained that in 1972 Governor Edwin Edwards signed the proclamation establishing Louisiana's eight Regional Planning Commissions. In 1973, the Imperial Calcasieu Regional Planning & Development Commission held its first board meeting. In 1984, the Lake Charles Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) was established, and the organization was designated as the MPO for the region. In 2000, the organization became the regional representative for the Delta Regional Authority (DRA). In 2022, SWLA-RPC assumed responsibilities for the Region 4 Watershed initiative. In 2023, the organization officially changed its name from Imperial Calcasieu Planning & Development Commission to Southwest Louisiana Regional Planning Commission.

Ms. Gaines explained that SWLA-RPC represents a broad range of governmental and regional entities, including parish and municipal governments, regional ports, airports, and the Coshatta Tribe of Louisiana.

Ms. Gaines then reviewed the MPO boundaries and explained that the MPO is not based on parish boundaries, but rather on population density. She noted that the MPO does not encompass all of Southwest Louisiana or even all of Calcasieu Parish. Instead, it primarily includes the City of Lake Charles, the City of Sulphur, the City of Westlake, the Town of Iowa, and surrounding urbanized areas within Calcasieu Parish.

Ms. Gaines also discussed the Region 4 Watershed boundaries, noting that the watershed initiative spans nine parishes from DeSoto Parish southward to Cameron Parish. She explained that the watershed initiative focuses on addressing the "seven spokes of the wheel," including repetitive flooding, clean water issues, and economic opportunities tied to watershed management and resilience. She emphasized that watershed efforts are intended not only to mitigate flooding but also to support economic opportunities within the region.

Ms. Gaines discussed the reasons communities invest in economic development, including sustainability, advocacy, leadership, innovation, and

collaboration. She explained that the ultimate goals are wealth distribution, job creation, and increased investment throughout Southwest Louisiana. She stated that these investments support parks, infrastructure, public safety, housing, quality of life improvements, and local, state, and federal governmental operations.

Ms. Gaines then discussed Mr. Mike Hollier's arrival at SWLA-RPC following his retirement from the Acadiana Planning Commission in 2020. She explained that one of Mr. Hollier's first actions was sending letters to all member governments asking about their needs, priorities, and shovel-ready projects. Out of 29 member governments, only five responded. Ms. Gaines stated that the organization quickly realized local governments preferred face-to-face conversations rather than surveys or letters. Through direct engagement, SWLA-RPC was able to better identify regional needs, priorities, and shovel-ready projects that could be advanced quickly if funding opportunities became available.

Ms. Gaines emphasized the importance of collaboration and communication, noting that understanding the needs of local governments and stakeholders throughout the community remains critical to the planning process.

Ms. Gaines then discussed the development of the region's previous Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy (CEDS), which occurred shortly after the COVID-19 pandemic, Hurricanes Laura and Delta, Winter Storm Uri, and historic flooding events throughout the region. She explained that the previous CEDS was heavily focused on recovery from those disasters. However, five years later, the region is now focused on moving beyond recovery and planning for long-term growth and resilience.

As part of the upcoming CEDS update, Ms. Gaines explained that SWLA-RPC will distribute a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) survey throughout the region. She stated that the previous survey effort reached approximately 700 participants and encouraged steering committee members to widely distribute the survey once released in order to gather broad public input.

Ms. Gaines then reviewed the five primary pillars of economic development:

1. Workforce Development
2. Infrastructure Investments
3. Sustainable Practices
4. Technology and Innovation
5. Special Projects

She noted that SWLA-RPC has also placed emphasis on "Special Projects" within the region. As an example, she explained that the I-10 Bridge replacement was once considered a special project, but after decades of discussion and planning, it

has now advanced into the infrastructure investment category due to active construction efforts.

IV. DISTRICT PRIORITIES

Mr. Mike Hollier
Executive Director

A. WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

B. INFRASTRUCTURE INVESTMENTS

C. SUSTAINABLE PRACTICES

D. TECHNOLOGY INNOVATION

E. SPECIAL PROJECTS

Workforce Development

Mr. Mike Hollier opened his remarks by acknowledging the challenges Southwest Louisiana has faced over the last five years following multiple federally declared disasters. He stated that discussions surrounding economic diversification have become increasingly important throughout the region.

Mr. Hollier explained that Southwest Louisiana has substantial interest from industries, manufacturers, and technology companies, both nationally and internationally. However, he stated that one of the primary barriers to diversification is infrastructure readiness. According to Mr. Hollier, industries evaluating the region consistently ask whether sewer, water, broadband, utilities, and other infrastructure systems are already in place before making investment decisions.

Mr. Hollier stated that many local governments hesitate to invest heavily in infrastructure without guaranteed development commitments, while many industries are unwilling to wait five to eight years for infrastructure expansion. He described this as a “chicken and egg” situation that continues to stall economic diversification efforts.

He also referenced the decades-long effort to replace the I-10 Bridge, noting that regional files documenting bridge discussions extend back approximately 35 years. Mr. Hollier emphasized the importance of coordination and long-term planning in securing infrastructure funding and advancing major projects.

During the discussion of workforce development, Mr. Hollier stated that workforce training efforts in Southwest Louisiana remain fragmented among individual parishes, unlike other regions where workforce development is centralized.

He discussed SWLA-RPC’s housing initiative and explained that one of the major challenges following the recent disasters was a severe shortage of

skilled trades professionals needed for demolition and reconstruction efforts. Mr. Hollier stated that improving perceptions of trades careers and increasing participation in trades training programs are critical components of both workforce development and long-term business retention.

Mr. Hollier also discussed opportunities related to regional industries and innovation. He referenced Ag Electric, located east of Chennault, which burns rice chaff to generate electricity. He explained that the burned rice chaff is exported internationally, including to China and Japan, and is also used in industrial filtering applications. Mr. Hollier stated that these types of regional assets and industries demonstrate unique economic opportunities that should be further explored.

He emphasized that SWOT discussions must also acknowledge threats facing the region, including insurance costs, insurability, housing affordability, infrastructure deterioration, and workforce shortages.

Infrastructure Investments

Mr. Hollier discussed the growing importance of resilient infrastructure systems, particularly following Hurricanes Laura and Delta. He explained that many communities have increasingly focused on underground utility systems, commonly referred to as “undergrounding,” to improve reliability during future disasters.

He stated that extended power and internet outages following recent storms highlighted how dependent modern businesses and communities have become on reliable utility systems. Mr. Hollier noted that portions of downtown Lake Charles were without internet service for more than a month after the hurricanes and questioned whether many businesses today could survive that type of disruption.

Mr. Hollier stated that with construction now underway on the I-10 Bridge replacement, the region should begin shifting attention toward the adjacent rail bridge, originally built in 1904. He explained that the bridge serves as a critical east-west rail corridor for the United States and noted concerns regarding its age and condition.

Ms. Jamie Gaines then invited committee members to provide input regarding infrastructure investments and business retention opportunities.

Mr. Jacob Dillehay discussed affordable housing concerns within Allen Parish and stated that much of the housing stock in local municipalities is 70 to 80 years old and deteriorating. He explained that many older homes were acquired by investors and converted into rental properties with unaffordable

rents. According to Mr. Dillehay, some investors are now attempting to sell those properties at prices beyond what many local residents can afford.

Mr. Dillehay stated that additional trades training and workforce development could potentially help lower housing costs by increasing the local construction workforce.

Mr. Hollier continued discussing infrastructure investments and referenced the Enterprise Boulevard project as an example of deteriorating underground infrastructure significantly increasing project costs. He explained that an originally planned \$1.1 million overlay project eventually increased to approximately \$20 million because the roadway required full reconstruction and underground utilities were too deteriorated to leave in place.

Mr. Hollier stated that SWLA-RPC is now placing greater emphasis on evaluating underground utilities, sewer systems, waterlines, and drainage infrastructure during roadway improvement planning.

He also discussed SWLA-RPC's Water Utility Optimization Service program, which assists member governments and water districts in addressing aging water infrastructure, water loss, and system inefficiencies. Mr. Hollier emphasized that freshwater availability will become increasingly important as demand grows and aquifers experience additional stress.

Mr. Hollier noted that all eleven aquifers serving Louisiana are currently under stress and not naturally recharging fast enough to meet demand. He discussed the growing challenges posed by salinity intrusion, agricultural demands, municipal consumption, and industrial usage.

He emphasized the importance of identifying both threats and opportunities and stated that the region must begin addressing water infrastructure and conservation challenges proactively.

Mr. Hollier also discussed additional regional initiatives and ideas, including:

- Transportation management centers to coordinate regional traffic signals
- Coastal erosion mitigation efforts
- Adjudicated properties lost to coastal erosion
- Emerging technologies such as autonomous vehicles
- Transit system coordination
- Regional drainage district fragmentation
- Housing resilience and maintenance
- Rail research opportunities tied to the Port of Lake Charles' public rail infrastructure

Mr. Hollier proposed that Southwest Louisiana’s unique public rail assets could support development of a regional rail research institute, potentially creating opportunities for rail innovation and testing.

Steering Committee Discussion

Ms. Claire Marceaux

Ms. Marceaux stated that coastal protection and restoration should remain a top priority because it impacts nearly every district-wide initiative discussed during the meeting.

Mr. Kyle Edmiston

Mr. Edmiston stated that the Lakefront should remain a special priority project because it serves as a major entertainment hub for all five parishes in the region.

Mr. Gus Fontenot

Mr. Fontenot discussed the importance of shovel-ready sites and stated that many industrial sites throughout the region lack the infrastructure businesses require, including water, sewer, fiber, and efficient permitting processes.

He also emphasized quality-of-life concerns and discussed difficulties marketing Lake Charles to outside visitors and prospective residents. Mr. Fontenot shared examples of recruitment challenges and noted that many visitors struggle to identify a defining “Lake Charles experience” outside of casino tourism.

Mr. Fontenot stated that the region would benefit from additional downtown and lakefront attractions that better represent the culture and identity of Southwest Louisiana.

Mr. Ben Boudreaux

Mr. Boudreaux emphasized transportation connectivity and discussed the potential benefits of extending U.S. 165 southward to improve regional access between South Lake Charles, Cameron Parish, and Jefferson Davis Parish.

Ms. Carter Prejean

Ms. Prejean discussed ongoing water access issues within Jefferson Davis Parish and expressed support for expanded water infrastructure and recreational projects, including the proposed Lacassine water park.

Mr. Alberto Galan

Mr. Galan discussed workforce development policy changes occurring at the state level and emphasized the importance of keeping up with evolving workforce funding and training programs.

He identified roads, bridges, sewer systems, drainage infrastructure, and water resources as critical regional priorities. Mr. Galan also stated that regional housing strategies remain fragmented and emphasized the need for coordinated housing planning throughout Southwest Louisiana.

Regarding technology and innovation, Mr. Galan stated that technological advancements across multiple sectors should remain a major focus area for the region.

He also expressed support for coastal restoration efforts and the Bayou Greenbelt project.

Mr. Jacob Dillehay

Mr. Dillehay stated that Allen Parish continues to face challenges related to funding, workforce retention, and economic competitiveness.

He expressed interest in exploring passenger rail opportunities connecting Oakdale to Lake Charles and stated that rail transit could help attract workforce participation and economic development.

Mr. Dillehay also discussed opportunities tied to surface water systems, forestry industries, and biofuel production, noting that portions of the timber industry may eventually shift toward biofuel markets.

Ms. Katie Armentor

Ms. Armentor discussed regional water management opportunities and proposed concepts involving capturing and redistributing surface water to support agricultural needs while reducing pressure on aquifers.

She explained that Cameron Parish experiences prolonged flooding and saturation issues while other areas, particularly agricultural communities, face water shortages. Ms. Armentor suggested that coordinated regional water management systems could provide dual benefits for flood mitigation and agricultural supply.

Ms. Armentor also discussed coastal restoration funding, drainage district coordination, and regional collaboration efforts involving the Chenier Plain Coastal Restoration & Protection Authority.

She emphasized the importance of regional cooperation rather than competition for funding resources and suggested that repurposing millages

or pooling regional resources could strengthen coastal restoration funding efforts.

Ms. Armentor also discussed tourism and transportation connectivity throughout the region. She noted that many parishes offer unique attractions, including ecotourism, fishing, hunting, shrimping, and coastal recreation opportunities, but stated that the region lacks a unified tourism identity and transportation connectivity between attractions.

She suggested developing a more coordinated regional tourism strategy and highlighted opportunities tied to ecotourism, guided fishing and shrimping experiences, and outdoor recreation.

Ms. Jill Gilmarini

Ms. Gilmarini stated that the Bayou Greenbelt project remains important and noted that many projects identified within the Just Imagine Plan could align with and support CEDS priorities.

Mayor Guinn

Mayor Guinn stated that many of the issues discussed during the meeting closely aligned with the needs and priorities of both the City of Jennings and Jefferson Davis Parish.

Closing Discussion

Ms. Gaines concluded the discussion by emphasizing the importance of integrating local plans, state plans, regional initiatives, Alliance planning efforts, and the Just Imagine Plan into the updated CEDS document. She encouraged committee members to continue sharing plans, priorities, and ideas for inclusion in the regional strategy.

Mr. Hollier concluded by discussing the benefits of tourism-oriented transit systems. He explained that visitors increasingly prefer transportation systems that allow them to move easily between destinations without navigating traffic, parking, or unfamiliar roadways. He encouraged the committee to consider these concepts as part of future regional planning efforts.

**V. STRENGTHS, WEAKNESSES, OPPORTUNITIES,
THREATS (SWOT) SURVEY**

Mr. Taylor Lowe
Senior Multimedia Designer

Deferred. The SWOT Survey will be emailed to committee members.

VI. NEXT MEETING

Thursday, June 11, 2026, Noon

Ms. Jamie Gaines

VII. ADJOURNMENT

Mr. Jacob Dillehay