

AI Summary: NFWUA: Col Cnty 5 Bypasses Two Ex-Utility Directors as Auth Directors. Cnty 5 Clashes – Accuse Each Other of “Politics”

At its July 2 meeting, the Columbia County Commission (known as "The 5") appointed two new members to the North Florida Water Utility Authority (NFWUA) board—local developer Jock Phelps and retired electrical contractor Walt Graham—while rejecting the two most credentialed applicants. These volunteer seats replace elected commissioners on the Authority overseeing water and wastewater services for unincorporated Columbia and Suwannee counties during a critical "build out phase."

The passed-over candidates, Steve Roberts and Stacy Cowart, were both former county utility directors offering decades of experience for free. When NFWUA Executive Director Shannon Roberts offered to rank the four applicants by fit, Chairman Tim Murphy cut him off:

"I'll stop you right there. We're not looking for that... this board is more than capable to read our backup material - make decisions on that." — *Chairman Tim Murphy*

Commissioner Rocky Ford objected, questioning why the county solicited résumés if experience would be ignored, and noting the top candidates were offering expertise previously worth hundreds of thousands of dollars:

"A pretty good gift to the Columbia County citizens." — *Commissioner Rocky Ford*

The voting was procedurally chaotic—the clerk could not follow the first vote, and the county attorney had to direct a roll-call to untangle results. Ford's motion for Roberts and Cowart failed; Phelps and Graham each passed 4–1, with Ford dissenting. The new members take their seats in August after attending July sessions.

The meeting closed with a pointed exchange. Ford accused the board of reintroducing politics into a body designed to be free of it, while Murphy claimed he "read between the lines" of the résumés, ultimately shutting down debate:

"We're moving on." — *Chairman Tim Murphy*

The article ends wryly: the "infamous Columbia County 5" they never disappoint.