

THE 936

News from Deep in
the East Texas Pines

March 2026 • Vol. 1, Edition 1

**IF BUILT TO FULL SCALE,
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WELCOME TO THE 936

There are easier things to do after losing a very public job than starting a very public publication. You can step back. You can move on. You can find another town where no one knows your story. No one would have blamed me. When I lost my job last fall, I heard the same sentence again and again: “I hope you’re going to stay here.” That question mattered more than anything else.

My family and I made a commitment to Lufkin and Deep East Texas when we came here. This community welcomed us, trusted us and allowed us to build relationships that went far beyond business. I couldn’t imagine returning that hospitality by walking away when the time got difficult.

It would have been easy to quietly look for another opportunity somewhere else. But if I had left at the first sign of adversity, what would that have said about the things I’ve written and said about this community?

For years, I’ve defended this region. I’ve praised it. I’ve challenged it. I’ve said it matters. If I cared as much as I claimed to care, then my actions had to match my words. So we stayed, and we built something new.

“The 936 exists for one reason: to bring in-depth reporting on the issues that matter to the people who invest in this community and work every day to make it better.”

The 936 is a monthly publication rooted right here in Deep East Texas. It is locally owned, locally produced and locally accountable. There is no distant corporate office. No outside ownership group deciding what matters here. There is me. I will write the majority of what you read in these pages. From time to time you’ll see contributions from others, but the responsibility for what appears here rests squarely on my shoulders.

When a publication is locally owned, it is locally responsible. If something is wrong, I answer for it. If a story needs follow-up, I pursue it. The 936 exists for one reason: to bring in-depth reporting on the issues that matter to the people who invest in this community and work every day to make it better.

Each month the publication is delivered directly to more than

10,000 homes in established neighborhoods across Lufkin and the surrounding area. The people who live there own businesses, run organizations, serve on boards, vote in elections and invest in the future of Deep East Texas. That focus is intentional.

The 936 is designed to reach people who care deeply about what happens here because they have invested their lives in this region. Starting something new always carries risk. I feel that weight. I also feel the responsibility—to my family, to those who have supported this effort, and to the households who will receive this publication each month.

Leaving would have been easier. Building something here is better. And we intend to be here long enough for that to matter. 🌲

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March 2026



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On the Cover:
Boggy Slough, Trinity County, Texas, along the Neches River. Photograph by Jay Brittain.

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Meeting Schedule

LUFKIN CITY COUNCIL:

The Lufkin City Council meets on the **first and third Tuesday of each month at 5:00 pm** in the council chambers, 300 Shepherd Ave.

LUFKIN PLANNING & ZONING BOARD:

The Lufkin Planning and Zoning Board meets on **the second and fourth Monday of each month at 5:00 pm** in the council chambers, 300 Shepherd Ave.

ANGELINA COUNTY COMMISSIONER'S COURT:

The Angelina County Commissioner's Court meeting on **the second and fourth Tuesday at 10:00 am** at 211 E. Shepherd Ave.

ELECTION RESULTS

2026 PRIMARY ELECTION RESULTS

BY: Greg Weatherbee

Winners

Trent Ashby

*Texas Senate District 3
(Republican Primary)*

Lufkin State Rep. Trent Ashby won the Republican primary for Senate District 3, defeating challenger Rhonda Ward with about 64% of the vote to 36%.

The seat is being vacated by longtime Sen. Robert Nichols. Because the district heavily favors Republicans, Ashby is widely expected to become the next state senator representing Deep East Texas if he wins the November general election.

For the region, that means a lawmaker who has represented Angelina County in the House for more than a decade could soon move into the Senate, giving the region an experienced voice in Austin.

Rocky Thigpen

*Texas House District 9
(Republican Primary)*

With Ashby leaving his House seat to run for Senate, the District 9 seat was open.

Businessman Rocky Thigpen won the Republican primary, defeating Paulette Carson and Stephanie Sjoberg.

State election results show Thigpen received 22,258 votes compared to 5,656 for Carson, securing the nomination by a wide margin.



State Rep. Trent Ashby

House District 9 includes Angelina County and surrounding areas, and like Senate District 3, it is considered a solid Republican district. That means Thigpen is now strongly positioned to become the district's next state representative in November.

Pat Grimes Grubbs

*Angelina County Justice of the Peace,
Precinct 3*

One of the few contested local races in Angelina County saw Pat Grimes Grubbs defeat Clint Caton, winning about 75% of the vote.

Because local Democratic opposition is limited in many East Texas races, the primary often effectively decides the officeholder.

Losers

Rhonda Ward

Texas Senate District 3

Ward mounted a high-profile campaign emphasizing conservative issues such as property

taxes and water protection but was unable to overcome Ashby's regional name recognition and legislative experience. Her loss ends one of the most closely watched political contests in East Texas this election cycle.

Paulette Carson and Stephanie Sjoberg

Texas House District 9

Both candidates fell short in the race to replace Ashby in the Texas House. Thigpen's decisive margin effectively ended the three-way contest without forcing a runoff.

Runoffs

While many Deep East Texas races were decided outright, several statewide contests will move to runoff elections, meaning voters will return to the polls later this spring.

U.S. Senate Republican Primary Runoff

The biggest runoff affecting East Texas voters will be between:

John Cornyn & Ken Paxton

Cornyn received about 41.9% of the vote statewide, while Paxton received about 40.7%, with neither candidate reaching the 50% required to win the nomination outright.

The runoff will determine which Republican faces the Democratic nominee in November.

Another Race to Watch

217th District Court Angelina County

This local judicial race appears headed to a runoff because no candidate received a majority of the vote.

Early results show:

Kristi Skillern—about 41.7%

Stephen Walker—about 37.6%

John Weismuller—about 20.7%

Because no candidate crossed the 50% threshold, the top two finishers will likely advance to a runoff election.

The biggest takeaway from the election is that Deep East Texas could soon see new representation in Austin.

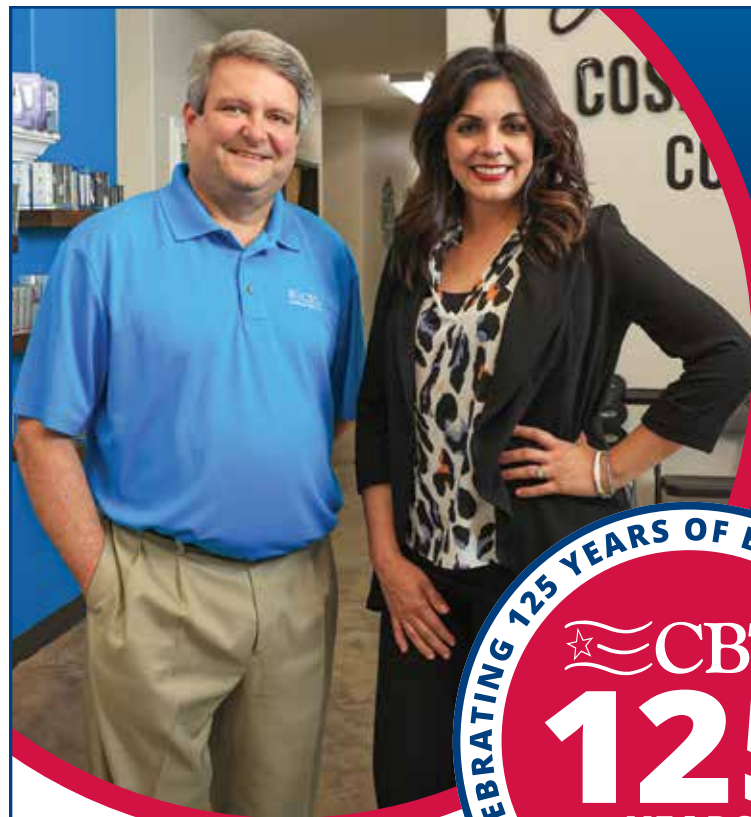
If the results hold through the general election:

Trent Ashby would move from the Texas House to the Texas Senate.

Rocky Thigpen would take Ashby's seat in the Texas House.

That transition would reshape the region's legislative delegation for the first time in more than a decade. At the same time, the upcoming U.S. Senate runoff between Cornyn and Paxton ensures East Texas voters will return to the polls again this spring to help decide one of the most closely watched political contests in Texas. 🗳️

The biggest takeaway from the election is that Deep East Texas could soon see new representation in Austin.



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POWERING CAUTION:

Community Urged to Reflect on Risks of Battery Energy Storage

BY: Greg Weatherbee



Nancy White, President of the Legislative Energy Action Foundation, discusses the safety concerns associated with lithium-ion batteries with a group of concerned residents in Nacogdoches last month.

A packed community meeting in Nacogdoches turned into a warning session on battery energy storage systems, as an energy activist urged residents and local officials to closely scrutinize proposed solar and battery projects for fire risks, cleanup costs and potential foreign supply chain concerns.

Nancy White, president of the Legislative Energy Action Foundation and a leader with the Secure the Texas Grid Coalition, told attendees that large battery storage installations—often paired with solar or wind projects—could present hazards that rural counties and volunteer fire departments may not be equipped to handle.

“It’s February 17th, and it is election season,” White told the crowd as she opened her presentation, thanking residents for what she described as a standing-room-only turnout. White introduced herself as a home school mother and housewife who also leads advocacy groups focused on grid reliability and energy infrastructure.

White framed battery storage as a temporary solution for intermittent renewable generation, arguing that solar and wind output is limited by inverter capacity and cannot provide consistent power during prolonged emergencies. She said the scale of battery backup being built does not match the length of outages Texans experienced during Winter Storm Uri.

Much of White’s presentation focused on safety concerns surrounding lithium-ion battery installations. She cited incidents at large battery storage facilities outside Texas, including the January 2025 fire at Vistra’s Moss Landing battery site in Monterey County, California. White said such fires can be difficult to extinguish and may reignite if damaged cells remain active.

White told attendees battery fires can escalate quickly and release hazardous byproducts, sometimes requiring evacuation or shelter-in-place orders for nearby communities. She said smaller emergency departments are often instructed to secure the scene and wait for specialized hazardous materials teams.

“Your job ... is to show up on site and wait for the professionals,” she said, describing what she called typical guidance for local responders. White also raised concerns about potential financial risks for rural communities hosting energy projects. She warned that renewable developments are often structured through limited liability companies and argued that if a developer goes bankrupt, cleanup and decommissioning costs could fall on landowners or local governments.

She said the financial burden could extend to emergency response agencies if fires or accidents require replacing

protective equipment contaminated during an incident. White also addressed national security concerns, saying much of the battery storage supply chain is dominated by Chinese manufacturers.

She referenced Gov. Greg Abbott’s Executive Order GA-48, issued in 2024, which directed state agencies to reduce exposure to technology linked to foreign adversaries. White also cited updates to Texas’ prohibited technologies list announced in January 2026 and the Lone Star Infrastructure Protection Act, a 2021 law intended to prevent certain foreign-owned companies from accessing critical infrastructure such as the electric grid and water systems.

White encouraged residents to ask local officials and project developers for documentation related to equipment sourcing, cybersecurity safeguards and emergency response plans.

She concluded by urging communities facing battery storage proposals to insist on strict safety standards and clear regulatory oversight.

White cited the National Fire Protection Association’s NFPA 855 standard governing energy storage installations and the UL 9540 testing framework used to evaluate battery systems, encouraging residents to verify compliance before projects move forward.

The meeting ended with White encouraging residents to stay engaged and ask questions about projects proposed in their communities, arguing that public safety should take priority over economic incentives tied to energy development. ☯

WORKFORCE IS NOT A FUTURE PROBLEM. IT IS A RIGHT-NOW PRIORITY FOR ANGELINA COUNTY.

BY: Tara Watkins, President / CEO, Lufkin | Angelina Chamber of Commerce

If you ask most employers in Angelina County what keeps them up at night, the answer is not taxes, regulations, or even competition. It is people. More specifically, having enough skilled, dependable workers to meet today's needs and tomorrow's growth.

Workforce challenges are not unique to our community, but how we choose to address them is. Too often, workforce development is framed as a long-term issue, something we will deal with later. The reality is that it affects our economy, our schools, our healthcare system, and our quality of life right now.

Local businesses are hiring. Many are willing to train. Some are offering competitive wages and benefits. Yet they continue to struggle to find and retain employees with the skills, reliability, and preparation needed to succeed in

today's workplace. This is not a criticism of our workforce. It is a call for alignment.

Workforce development is not owned by one entity. It takes collaboration between education, industry, workforce partners, and local government. When those groups operate in silos, opportunities are missed. When they work together, entire communities benefit.

In Angelina County, we are fortunate to have strong school districts, a committed community college, engaged employers, and partners who care deeply about

our region's future. The challenge before us is ensuring students understand the many paths available to them and that those paths align with real job opportunities here at home.

Not every student is meant for a traditional four-year degree, and that is not a failure. Skilled trades, healthcare, manufacturing, logistics, and technology careers offer meaningful work and strong earning potential. We must continue changing the narrative so that every pathway is valued, respected, and visible.

Employers also have a role to play. Investing time in students, opening doors for job shadowing, internships, and mentorships, and clearly communicating workforce needs helps build a stronger pipeline. When young people can see themselves in a career, they are more likely to pursue it. 🌱



Tara Watkins, President / CEO, The Lufkin | Angelina County Chamber of Commerce

the CHAMBER
LUFKIN | ANGELINA COUNTY

The challenge before us is ensuring students understand the many paths available to them and that those paths align with real job opportunities here at home.

PROPOSED 2.1-GIGAWATT AI DATA CENTER NEAR LUFKIN RAISES QUESTIONS ABOUT POWER, WATER AND LONG-TERM IMPACT

BY: Greg Weatherbee

A proposed 2.1-gigawatt AI data center near Lufkin raises questions about power, water and long-term impact. A proposed 2.1-gigawatt artificial intelligence data center campus on the site of the former Southland Paper Mill is being described by local officials as a transformative economic opportunity for Angelina County, but the scale of the project is also drawing scrutiny over infrastructure demands and long-term community impact.

The project, known as Project Lufkin and led by developer Amp Z, would span more than 1,000 acres near the Neches River. Company materials describe a phased development beginning with approximately 175 megawatts of capacity by 2026, expanding to 1.1 gigawatts by 2028 and ultimately reaching 2.1 gigawatts. Plans also call for up to 1 gigawatt of on-site self-generation capacity by 2029.

If built to full scale, the campus would rank among the largest AI-focused data center developments in Texas.

City of Lufkin officials have described the project as a “once-in-a-lifetime” opportunity, estimating a total investment between \$1.05 billion and \$1.5 billion. Early projections indicate the campus could generate roughly

\$4.6 million annually in property tax revenue once fully operational, though final figures would depend on valuation and any negotiated tax abatements.

The proposal estimates up to 500 construction jobs during peak building phases and about 30 permanent positions once the campus is operational.

Data centers house servers that process and store digital information. Facilities designed for artificial intelligence workloads require significantly more electricity than traditional cloud computing centers because AI systems operate continuously and draw dense power loads.

To illustrate the scale, one gigawatt of electricity is generally considered enough to power roughly 200,000 homes under typical residential demand assumptions. A 2.1-gigawatt campus would represent a theoretical load comparable to hundreds of thousands of households, though actual consumption depends on phasing and power sourcing arrangements.

Amp Z’s proposal includes negotiations with the nearby Longleaf Power Generation Plant and reported agreements with Oncor for transmission infrastructure. Public discussions indicate a hybrid approach combining utility-supplied electricity with on-site generation.

Similar AI and hyper-scale data center projects across Texas have triggered debate over grid reliability, water usage and long-term public costs.

In Abilene, companies including Lancium and Crusoe Energy are developing large-scale data infrastructure projects tied to renewable and self-generation strategies. In Temple, Meta operates a major data center campus that brought hundreds of construction jobs but maintains a relatively small permanent workforce.

Modern data centers rely heavily on automation and specialized technical workers, meaning long-term employment levels are typically modest compared with the size of the investment. Water use can also vary widely depending on cooling design. Some facilities rely on evaporative cooling systems that consume significant water, while others use closed-loop or air-cooled systems that reduce demand. Public statements about the Lufkin proposal indicate



An aerial view of the former Southland Paper Mill property shows the area for a proposed 2.1 GW AI data center. City of Lufkin and Angelina County officials describe the development a “once in a lifetime” opportunity.

portions of the campus may use closed-loop cooling technology, though full engineering details have not been released.

Supporters argue redeveloping the former Southland Paper Mill site offers an opportunity to reuse established industrial land with existing transmission corridors and rail access.

Angelina County’s industrial base has

**“Once-in-a-lifetime
opportunity”**

— CITY OF LUFKIN

historically centered on timber, paper and manufacturing. The addition of a large AI campus would represent a shift toward digital infrastructure and advanced computing.

Whether the full 2.1-gigawatt build out ultimately occurs remains uncertain. Large AI campuses are often constructed in phases that depend on financing, tenant commitments and transmission timelines.

For Lufkin and Angelina County, the proposal presents both opportunity and complexity as officials and residents weigh the potential economic benefits against infrastructure demands associated with a project of unprecedented scale for the community. 🌳

LUFKIN ISD FACES CRUCIAL VOTE ON \$140.25 MILLION BOND PACKAGE TO MODERNIZE SCHOOLS AND BUILD NEW STADIUM

BY: Greg Weatherbee



Voters in the Lufkin Independent School District will decide May 2 whether to approve a \$140.25 million bond package district officials say is designed to modernize aging facilities, expand career and technical education programs and improve safety and transportation.

The Lufkin ISD Board of Trustees unanimously voted in February to place the proposal on the ballot following months of study by a community-based bond advisory committee. If approved, the package would be divided into two propositions, allowing voters to consider academic improvements separately from a proposed new stadium.

Superintendent Dr. James Hockenberry said the proposal reflects priorities identified by district leadership and community members. “This bond proposal reflects what we believe are the priorities of our students, our teachers and our community,” Hockenberry said in district materials announcing the election.

Proposition A, totaling \$98.25 million, would fund renovations at Lufkin High School, including upgrades to classrooms, labs and instructional spaces. It also includes expansion of Career and Technical Education facilities, construction of a new agricultural barn, replacement of aging school buses and districtwide safety improvements. District officials say many campuses and systems targeted in the plan are decades old and require upgrades to meet current educational and workforce training needs.

Proposition B, totaling \$42 million, would fund construction of a new Lufkin High School stadium. District officials say the existing stadium has served the community for decades but requires significant upgrades. Supporters argue a new facility would benefit athletics, band programs, graduation ceremonies and other large events.

The financial impact of the proposal is expected to be a key factor for voters. District estimates indicate that if both propositions

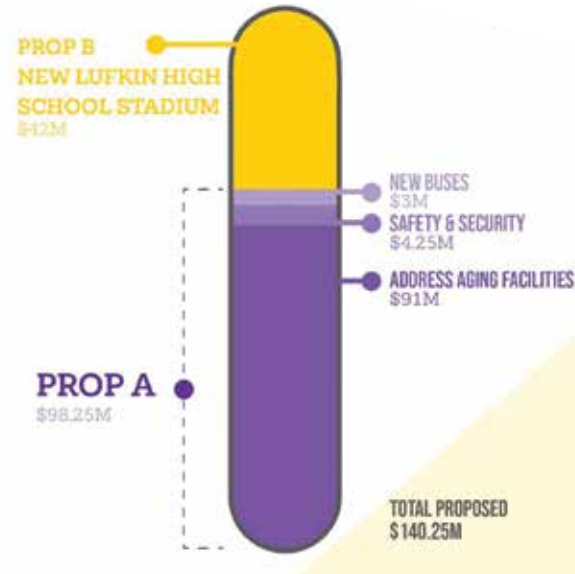
are approved, the tax rate increase would result in an estimated monthly increase of about \$7 to \$9 for the average homeowner, depending on property value.

District officials have noted that the increased homestead exemption approved statewide in 2023 could offset some of the impact for homeowners. Supporters argue investing in facilities now could prevent more costly repairs later and help maintain the district's

ability to attract families and employers to the area.

Early voting for the May 2 election is expected to begin in mid-April, with polling locations to be announced by the county elections office. "This election is an opportunity for our entire community to shape the future of our schools," Hockenberry said. "We encourage everyone to learn about the proposals and participate in the process." 🌳

BOND 26



"This election is an opportunity for our entire community to shape the future of our schools."

— HOCKENBERRY

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Reviving Power: 1606 Corp's Bold Bid for Lufkin's Idle Sellers Street Plant

BY: Greg Weatherbee

A Nevada-based public company with a limited operating history is seeking to acquire the long-idled Sellers Street power plant in North Lufkin as part of a strategy tied to artificial intelligence and data infrastructure.

1606 Corp., which trades on the over-the-counter market under the ticker CBDW, announced it has entered into a nonbinding term sheet to purchase approximately 132 acres of property, including a 55-megawatt generation facility and related equipment, for about \$11.67 million.

Under the proposed agreement, the company would pay

\$7.5 million in cash at closing and assume approximately \$4.17 million in existing debt. The parties have agreed to a 15-day inspection period while definitive agreements are negotiated. The company said it expects the transaction to close on or before March 11, subject to final documentation and customary conditions. The agreement is not binding until final contracts are executed.

1606 Corp. is a micro-cap public company whose shares trade on the OTC market rather than a major exchange such as the New York Stock Exchange or NASDAQ. Companies trading over the

counter are typically smaller and subject to less stringent reporting requirements than exchange-listed firms.

Company releases indicate 1606 Corp. previously focused on artificial intelligence software products, including chatbot technologies. More recently, the company has signaled a shift toward acquiring power generation assets to support AI and high-density computing operations. The Lufkin proposal represents its first publicly announced attempt to acquire a large-scale power facility.

According to the company, the property includes a building

(See 1606 Corp. on page 13)

(1606 Corp. continued)

described as “data center ready” and an existing generation facility capable of providing behind-the-meter power—electricity produced on-site and delivered directly to a facility rather than transmitted through the broader electric grid.

The Sellers Street plant was originally developed as the Aspen Power biomass facility. Approved in 2007 and opened in 2011, it was described at the time as the first wood-waste biomass electric generation plant built in Texas.

The project later struggled financially as wholesale electricity prices in the ERCOT market fell below production costs. Although the plant received a \$32 million federal grant through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, it ultimately shut down. In 2016, the facility was sold at a sheriff’s auction for \$4.96 million after foreclosure proceedings tied to roughly \$53 million in bonds.

Plans to redevelop the property have surfaced before. In 2021, Jefferson Enterprise Energy LLC announced intentions to convert the site into a renewable-powered manufacturing operation with a city-approved tax abatement tied to job creation and investment. Large-scale redevelopment has not occurred, and the plant remains largely inactive.

If the acquisition is completed and operations resume, the site could return to industrial use and potentially generate construction activity and long-term operational jobs. However, the transaction remains preliminary, and financing details have not been disclosed. 🌱

CITY COUNCIL REBUKES SUBSTATION PLAN, OKS HOTEL PERMIT OVER PROPERTY PROTEST

BY: Greg Weatherbee

A packed February for the Lufkin City Council brought sharp debate over infrastructure and development, as the council rejected a proposed utility expansion and later approved a contested hotel permit that drew opposition from a nearby property owner.



At two meetings this month, council members weighed residents’ concerns about neighborhood impacts alongside the city’s growth priorities.

On Feb. 3, the council voted 6–1 to deny Oncor Electric Delivery Co.’s request to expand its substation on Brentwood Drive near the Crown Colony subdivision, a project utility officials said was needed to address growing electrical demand.

Residents urged council members to protect their neighborhood from what they described as encroaching industrial infrastructure.

“So we have six voting for the denial and one voting against,” Mayor Mark Hicks said as he announced the vote. “This council has heard the voices of the neighbors and made its decision tonight.”

One resident warned during public comment that a larger electrical facility near homes would “reduce the value of her home, limit the pool of potential buyers and significantly increase the time it sits on the market.”

An Oncor representative cautioned that delaying upgrades could create technical risks, telling the council the station could be overloaded by “117% by this summer” without improvements. Council members acknowledged the concern but ultimately sided with residents.

With the city’s denial, Oncor indicated it could pursue approval through the Public Utility Commission of Texas, which has authority over transmission infrastructure.

Two weeks later, on Feb. 17, council members considered a special use permit for a proposed extended-stay hotel in the Garden District Shopping

Village Subdivision. The ordinance would allow construction of a more than 90-room Towne Place Suites by Marriott.

Opposition centered on whether the developer had legal access through a disputed easement on adjacent property owned by local business owner Amy Padilla.

“I’m seeing that there’s a hotel developer coming in and I feel like the city is also supporting it and attempting to take about 40 feet of private property to make an easement for their driveway,” Padilla told the council. “They do not have any easement and they do not have a legal right to use it.”

Padilla argued a recorded plat shows the easement ends before her property line and said approving plans reliant on disputed land was both legally and ethically wrong.

City Planner Alaina Helton told council members the developer provided a recorded access easement filed in 2023 extending from North Medford Drive to the hotel property, adding that disputes between private property owners fall outside the city’s authority to resolve.

Mayor Hicks echoed that position during the meeting.

“It’s just a dispute between the two private property owners,” Hicks said. “We’re not here to decide that.”

Council members ultimately approved the permit, citing the potential economic benefits of expanded lodging capacity.

The debates drew significant public participation and highlighted the competing priorities facing city leaders as Lufkin continues to grow—balancing neighborhood concerns, property rights and new development opportunities. 🌱

RESIDENTIAL MARKET DATA

BY: Thomas Darmstadter II, Texas Licensed Real Estate Broker / tdarmstadterii@darmstadter.com

Overview of neighborhood housing activity highlighting active listings, homes sold, closed sales, median prices, and average days on market to reflect local real estate trends and market performance.



Active Residential Listings by Neighborhood
as of 3/5/2025

Crown Colony	14
Allendale	10
Brookhollow	12
Inwood Terrace	2
Oak Trace	2
Four Seasons	1
South Ridge	1
The Settlement	1
Trailwood	1
Saddle Creek	
South Bend	

Residential Closed Listings by Year - 2024 vs 2025

Closed 2024	100
Closed 2025	131



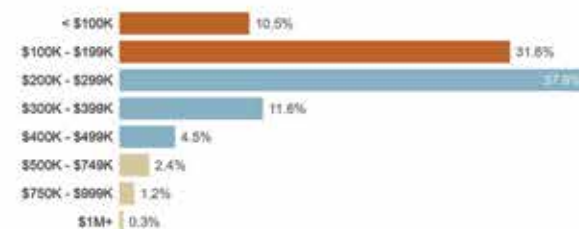
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2025 Year in Review Lufkin Residential Market Recap

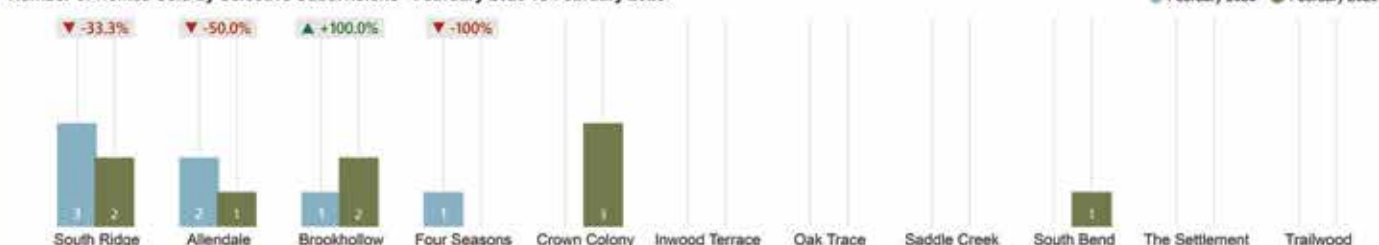
Median Home Size	1,677
Median Year Built	1983
Close/Original List	91.90%

Metric	Value	YoY Change
Median Price	219,000	▲ 4.3%
Closed Sales	335	▲ 6.0%
Active Listings	181	▲ 56.0%
Months Inventory	6	▲ 0.1
Days On Market	74	▲ 12
Days To Close	26	▲ 2024
Total Days	102	▲ 12
Median Price/Sq Ft	126	▼ -0.6%

Price Distribution



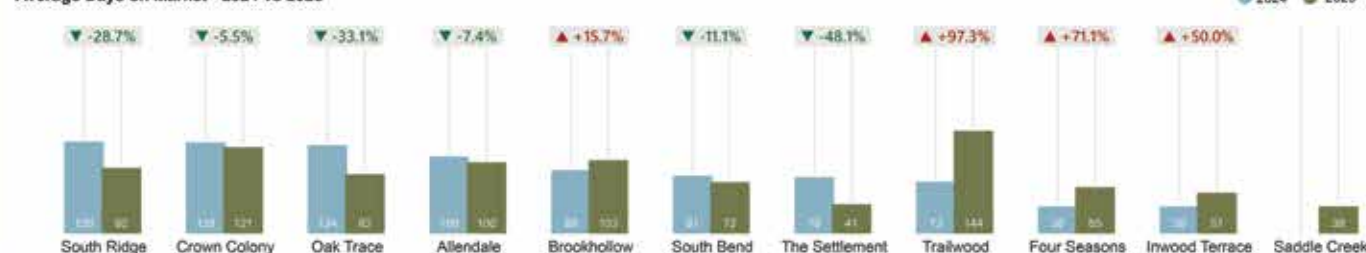
Number of Homes Sold by Selective Subdivisions - February 2025 vs February 2026



Median Home Sales Price - 2024 vs 2025

Neighborhood	2024	2025
Allendale	\$210,000	\$173,000
Brookhollow	\$252,500	\$265,000
Crown Colony	\$283,500	\$300,000
Four Seasons	\$233,450	\$249,900
Inwood Terrace	\$191,000	\$188,000
Oak Trace	\$380,000	\$310,000
Saddle Creek	\$0	\$1,322,000
South Bend	\$480,250	\$389,900
South Ridge	\$243,000	\$222,900
The Settlement	\$415,000	\$320,000
Trailwood	\$162,250	\$155,000

Average Days on Market - 2024 vs 2025



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