

**Workforce Development Board (WDB)
Executive Committee
Worknet Merced County
1900 Airdrome Entry,
Atwater, CA 95301
March 9th, 2026, 7:30 a.m.**



www.worknetmerced.com

Members Present:

Leslie Abasta

David W. Ness

Daron McDaniel

Vinton Thengvall

Members Absent:

Tim O'Neill

Others Present:

Erick Serrato, Linda Gutierrez, Stacie Tury, Valente Huitron, King Phomphakdy, Tamra Spade, John Ceccoli

1. **Call to Order/ Roll Call** – The meeting was called to order by the WDB Chair, Leslie Abasta, at 7:30 a.m.
2. **Public Opportunity to Speak** – None.
3. **Approval of Minutes** – Motion to approve the February 2nd, 2026, WDB Executive meeting minutes was made by Daron McDaniel and seconded by Vinton Thengvall. Motion approved.
4. **Chair Comments** – Chair Abasta welcomed David Ness to the Executive Committee and thanked him for accepting the invitation to join.
5. **Director's Comments** – Director Serrato welcomed David Ness and provided a brief overview of the Executive Committee's role, noting that it serves as a space for technical report-outs and deeper dialogue before full Workforce Board meetings. Director Serrato also welcomed Deputy Director Tamra Spade as a public attendee, and Director Ceccoli, who was invited to participate in the upcoming discussion on subsidized employment. Director Serrato shared brand transition efforts and board item in development.
6. **Fiscal and Monitoring Update** – Fiscal manager, Linda Gutierrez, reported that the close budget was successfully submitted last Friday with no issues.
7. **Facilities Update** – Progress is being made on the new flagship site at the Merced Mall. The interior suite is on track for a March 31st completion, with a target move-in date for late April. However, the landlord is currently out of compliance with a lease clause requiring the exterior building envelope to be renovated prior to occupancy. The committee agreed to hold the landlord to the contract and require a definite timeline for the exterior work.
8. **Grant Updates** – Director Serrato shared updates on several funding opportunities and regional initiatives:
 - A pending \$1 million grant from EDD to serve targeted populations.
 - An upcoming \$1 million grant submission in partnership with San Joaquin and Stanislaus

focused on advanced

- **North Valley Thrive Initiatives:** The region is pursuing a \$5 million state fund for early-stage nuclear fusion development. Additionally, region is advocating for the Port of Stockton to be included in a multi-billion-dollar federal shipbuilding/maritime fund, positioning “California Now” as a developed industrial alternative to the proposed “California Forever” city in Solano County.

9. **Board Recruitment** – The board must fill 8 vacancies by June to remain in compliance. Director Serrato outlined the need for representatives in Healthcare (to replace Dale Johns), Agriculture/Growers, Logistics, Technology, Adult Education (to replace Steve Hobbs), and Economic Development (expected to be Mark Mimms). The committee brainstormed several prospects across these sectors.

The committee discussed and expressed support for adding a position on the Workforce Board for the County Human Services/TANF/social services Director. This addition would be included in a future by laws revision for formal approval.

10. **On-The-Job Training/Wage Subsidy Concept** – Director Serrato proposed a strategic shift in how On-the-Job Training (OJT) funds are utilized. Rather than subsidizing 50% of low-wage jobs for short periods, the Director proposed using \$1.2 million in saved funds to run a targeted campaign focused on job quality. The new concept would fund wage increases for up to a year to help employers raise wages. The committee responded positively and discussed the compounding issue of healthcare affordability for small businesses, suggesting potential future strategies to help employers offer better health benefits.

11. **World Agri-Tech Tour** – The tour is scheduled for March 19th and 20th. Tamra Spade is assisting with the event. The tour is expected to host 18 international executives to Merced.

12. **Adjournment** – The meeting was adjourned at 8:44 a.m.