

Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA)
Meeting Minutes January 13, 2026
(DRAFT)

1/13/2026 - Minutes

1. CALL TO ORDER & ROLL CALL

Members Present: Chair Robin Gibson, Carol Gillespie, Keith Thompson, Jack Hilligoss

Member Absent: Daniel Williams

Staff Present: James Slaton, Executive Director; Jennifer Nanek, City Clerk; Albert C. Galloway, Jr., City Attorney

Chair Gibson called the meeting to order at approximately 2:00 p.m.

2. COMMENTS AND PETITIONS

Howard Davie, resident, recommended a permanent portable toilet downtown.

Michelle Martin, resident, requested garbage cans on Lincoln Ave.

3. Minutes - November 11, 2025

Mayor Hilligoss made a motion to approve the minutes of November 11, 2025. Commissioner Thompson seconded the motion.

by voice vote:

ALL: "YES"

motion passed 4-0.

4. Presentation - Main Street, Quarterly Report

Joy Pruitt, Main Street Director, gave a quarterly report.

Main Street Director Joy Pruitt reported a highly successful final quarter for 2024, highlighted by the Halloween Spooktacular which drew 3,000 guests. The "Festival of Trees" also saw significant engagement with over 300 visitors. Most notably, the "Make It Magical" event experienced explosive growth; attendance jumped from 3,800 visitors in 2024 to approximately 6,100 in 2025. Pruitt expressed gratitude for the City Commission's visible presence at these events, noting that residents took positive notice of their participation.

Upcoming Lunch Live Series and New Businesses

To kick off the new year, Main Street is launching the "Lunch Live" series starting January 30th. The lineup features a diverse range of entertainment, beginning with Bluegrass Country in January, followed by "beachy" middle-of-the-road music in February, and the Joey Foley Trio (a three-piece country band) in March. Additionally, Pruitt highlighted the arrival of The Dark Cafe, which is expected to enhance downtown dining options with "sweet bread" breakfast offerings such as muffins and danishes.

Spring Friday Series and Downtown Activation

In partnership with the city, Main Street is introducing the "Lake Wales Spring Friday Series" to further activate Market Plaza. Running from 4:30 PM to 8:30 PM starting February 6th, these family-friendly events will include live music, food, drinks, and contests. Featured themed nights include the "Moonlight Masquerade" (leading into Mardi Gras), the "Blarney Berry Beer Festival" on March 13th with an Irish flair, and an ambitious "Mad Hatter Tea Party" intended to be the largest in the region.

Social Media Impact and Financial Performance

The digital footprint of Lake Wales has seen a massive surge, with Ms. Pruitt reporting over 1.38 million social media views between October 1st and February 12th. Financially, Main Street continues to exceed its obligations. Tasked with raising \$12,500 per quarter, the organization raised \$24,370 in the fourth quarter. After accounting for carryovers and new fundraising totals of \$13,999.52, the organization is heading into the next quarter with a total of \$25,869.52, requesting a carryover of \$13,369.52 to maintain momentum for future projects.

Commissioner Gillespie asked about bathroom facilities. Ms. Pruitt said that port-o-lets were rented for the Make it Magical event. Commissioner Gillespie asked about permanent port-o-lets downtown. Ms. Pruitt said she was not in favor of this as they would not go with the aesthetic in downtown we are looking for.

5. Vubin' Vinny's Restaurant 230 E. Park Avenue Units #24 And #25 Lake Wales Food-Related Services Grant

[Begin Agenda Memo]

SYNOPSIS: The CRA Board will consider awarding the Food Services Grant to Gene and Lynette Hofferber business owners of Vubin Vinny's previously known as The Pink Flamingo and Fifties Diner.

RECOMMENDATION: Staff recommends to pay the awarded \$50,000 food-services grant to Gene and Lynette Hofferber, business owners of Vubin Vinny's previously known as The Pink Flamingo & Fifties Diner. Per the criteria of the Lake Wales Food-Related Services Grant, all requirements have been met, in particular, \$131,443.28 is documented eligible improvements and meets the criteria of the applicable match/reimbursement of \$50,000.

BACKGROUND: The Lake Wales Food-Related Services Grant offers up to \$50,000 in dollar-for-dollar matching funds to assist in establishing restaurants or a food-related service.

On July 8, 2025 the CRA Board unanimously approved to fund the Lake Wales Food-Related Services Grant for The Pink Flamingo & Fifties Diner, now known as Vubin' Vinny's

NOTE: When Gene and Lynette Hofferber initially submitted the Food-Related Services Grant application, the proposed name of the business was The Pink Flamingo & Fifties Diner. The business name change occurred prior to the restaurant opening in December 2025. Also noteworthy, The Pink Flamingo Ice Cream parlor relocated from Unit #27 to the more spacious Unit #24, with tables and chairs for their diner and ice cream customers.

BUILDING DESCRIPTION 230 East Park Avenue, (Park Avenue Rhodesbilt Arcade) Listed on the National Register of Historic Places; Constructed in 1920

FISCAL IMPACT Economic Development with the transformation of two empty storefronts into a restaurant Return on Investment Increase of neighboring property owners to make improvements

[End Agenda Memo]

Ronni Wood, Assistant CRA Director, reviewed this item.

Chair Gibson said the restaurant is unique and a destination.

Commissioner Gillespie asked if they are asking for this at the wrong time. Ms. Wood reviewed and clarified the timeline. The board approved this application previously and now the project is complete.

Mayor Hilligoss made a motion to approve this award. Commissioner Thompson seconded the motion.

by roll call vote:

Mayor Hilligoss "YES"

Commissioner Thompson "YES"

Commissioner Gillespie "YES"

Chair Robin Gibson "YES"

Motion approved 4-0.

6. Housing Opportunities For Mobility & Equity (HOME) Program

[Begin Agenda Memo]

SYNOPSIS: Staff is requesting CRA Board approval of HOME Program for disabled residents.

RECOMMENDATION It is recommended that the CRA Board take the following actions:

1. Approve request to allow for housing rehabilitation repairs for HOME Program.
2. Authorize total expenditure of \$50,000 as a reallocation from Housing Rehabilitation budget line item.

BACKGROUND The HOME Program is a pilot program designed to provide accessibility-focused home repairs and modifications for residents in the Lake Wales CRA. The program will directly address accessibility and housing equity for residents with disabilities through:

- Promoting Independent Living The program enables individuals with mobility, vision, hearing, or cognitive challenges to age in place by making their homes safer and more accessible. This reduces reliance on institutional care and supports dignity and independence.
- Enhancing Safety and Health By funding modifications like ramps, grab bars, widened doorways, and non-slip flooring, the program helps prevent falls and injuries, which are common risks for disabled residents.
- Supporting Economic and Social Inclusion Accessible housing allows residents to remain active in their neighborhoods, fostering community engagement and reducing isolation. It also aligns with the Lake Wales CRA vision of "safe neighborhoods" and "life-long learning" opportunities.
- Advancing Strategic Goals The program contributes to the CRA's strategic goals by ensuring homes are not only affordable, but also functional for all income levels and abilities (Support Quality Housing) and accessibility improvements complement broader efforts to make Lake Wales pedestrian-friendly (Improve Connectivity and Mobility).
- Reducing Financial Burden Home modifications can be costly. By providing assistance of up to \$10,000, the program ensures that low-income or fixed-income households can afford necessary upgrades without financial hardship.

OTHER OPTIONS Do not approve funds for HOME Program.

FISCAL IMPACT The fiscal impact of \$50,000 reallocated from 105-559-300-883-143 (Housing Rehabilitation).

[End Agenda Memo]

Deena Drumgo, Assistant City Manager, reviewed this item.

James Slaton, Executive Director, asked to confirm that Keystone will do the work. Ms. Drumgo confirmed this.

Chair Gibson asked about the allocation in the budget. Ms. Drumgo said the funds are being reallocated from the housing rehabilitation line item. Mr. Slaton said we can transfer the funds but we need the board to approve the program.

Assistant City Manager Deena Drumgo clarified the eligibility requirements for the program. In response to inquiries about whether the disabled resident must be the homeowner, Ms. Drumgo explained that while the property owner must ultimately submit the application, the program is designed to be inclusive. If a disabled resident is renting, they can benefit from the program provided they have written approval from the landlord for the modifications. She noted that the program also covers households where a family member of the owner is the one with the disability, citing a previous "legacy home" project where a ramp was installed for a homeowner's brother.

Ms. Drumgo emphasized that previous housing efforts have significantly boosted city morale and strengthened neighborhood ties. Commissioner Thompson shared his own experiences with disability and the "human psychology" of not always recognizing one's own need for help. He stressed the importance of being proactive in community outreach, noting that even small modifications—like a ramp for a half-inch step—can drastically change a person's quality of life. He said that the program would be a "net positive," offering dignity and independence to those struggling with either temporary or permanent mobility issues.

Commissioner Thompson made a motion to approve this program. Commissioner Gillespie seconded the motion.

by roll call vote:

Commissioner Thompson "YES"

Commissioner Gillespie "YES"

Mayor Hilligoss "YES"

Chair Gibson "YES"

Motion passed 4-0.

7. Northwest Neighborhood Sidewalk Improvements Project (Phase II) – Construction Contract With Garcia Civil Contractors

[Begin Agenda Memo]

SYNOPSIS: Staff is requesting CRA Board approval for a Construction Contract with Garcia Civil Contractors for the Northwest Neighborhood Sidewalk Improvements Project (Phase II).

RECOMMENDATION It is recommended that the CRA Board take the following actions:

1. Approve the construction contract with Garcia Civil Contractors.
2. Authorize the expenditure of \$461,732.54.
3. Authorize the City Manager to execute the necessary documents on behalf of the City.

BACKGROUND The City of Lake Wales advertised an Invitation to Bid (ITB) # 26-04 on November 19, 2025 for the Northwest Neighborhood Sidewalk Improvements Project (Phase II). The scope of work for the project consists of the construction of concrete sidewalks, approximately 1.25 miles total length for eight (8) streets to include:

- Orange Avenue from 1st Street west to Wetmore Street
- Wetmore Street from the intersection of Orange Avenue north to Sessoms Avenue
- Sessoms Avenue from 1st Street east to Scenic Highway • Seminole Avenue from 1st Street east to the RR tracks
- Seaboard Avenue from 1st Street west to MLK Boulevard
- Dorsett Avenue from 1st Street west to MLK Boulevard
- B Street from Dorsett Avenue north to Dr. JA Wiltshire Avenue
- C Street from Dorsett Avenue north to Dr. JA Wiltshire Avenue

The City received a total of fourteen (14) bids. All bids were reviewed by Colliers Project Leaders and City Staff. Garcia Civil Contractors was selected as the lowest responsive bid in the amount of \$461,732.54

Bid # 26-04 NW Sidewalk Improvements Ph 2 Bid Open Date:12/19/2025 2:00PM

Bidder Total

AJ General Construction Services, Inc. \$ 675,420.75

All County Paving \$ 660,624.80

American Design Engineering Construction, Inc. \$ 468,745.00

Blacktip Services, Inc. \$ 802,400.00

Cathcart Construction Company - Florida, LLC \$ 772,567.50

Central Concrete Products, Inc. \$ 539,595.00

Cobb Site Development, Inc. \$ 630,650.19 EZ

Contracting, LLC \$ 692,040.00

Garcia Civil Contractors \$ 461,732.54

KDL Underground & Development Inc. \$ 741,921.00

Newson Construction & Consulting \$ 499,455.00

Rogar Management & Consulting of FL, LLC \$ 853,170.00

SEMCO Construction, Inc. \$ 889,612.97

Sun Civil, LLC \$ 735,945.40

LAKE WALES CONNECTED PLAN ACTION STEPS

Action # Description

11 Construct missing sidewalks in the Northwest Neighborhood: include a sidewalk on a least one side of each street; key connectors should have sidewalks on both sides.

65 Continue to construct missing sidewalks in the Northwest Neighborhood

OTHER OPTIONS Do not approve the Construction Contract with Garcia Civil Contractors for the Northwest Neighborhood Sidewalk Improvements Project Phase II

FISCAL IMPACT The total fiscal impact for this contract is \$461,732.54

[End Agenda Memo]

Deena Drumgo, Assistant City Manager, reviewed this item.

Chair Gibson asked to confirm that the money is in the budget. Ms. Drumgo confirmed this.

Assistant City Manager Deena Drumgo clarified the relationship between this contract and previous work. She explained that while Phase I covered approximately 13 streets in the Northwest neighborhood, this second phase adds eight more streets to the network. In response to a query from Chair Gibson, staff confirmed that this phase represents the completion of the planned sidewalk improvements for this specific area. Once the contract is executed, the city will hold a pre-construction meeting to establish a firm timeline and schedule a formal ribbon-cutting ceremony to celebrate the project's conclusion.

Executive Director James Slaton highlighted the project's fiscal performance, noting that the total expenditure for this phase aligns with the CRA's budget. He emphasized that the final contract amount is significantly lower than the original project estimates, suggesting a high level of cost-efficiency in the procurement process. With the Board's approval, the City Manager is authorized to finalize all necessary documentation to begin construction, marking a major milestone in improving connectivity and safety for residents in the Northwest Neighborhood.

Mayor Hilligoss made a motion to approve this item. Commissioner Gillespie seconded the motion.

by roll call vote:

Mayor Hilligoss "YES"

Commissioner Gillespie "YES"

Commissioner Thompson "YES"

Chair Gibson "YES"

Motion passed 4-0.

8. EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S REPORT

James Slaton, Executive Director, announced the City's Spring Friday Series and commended the Communications department for their efforts on this event.

9. BOARD MEMBER COMMENTS

Commissioner Gillespie addressed a concern previously raised by resident Howard Davis regarding the need for permanent public restrooms in the downtown area. Referencing the high volume of visitors that downtown Lake Wales has attracted for recent events, she expressed support for the idea of installing permanent facilities. She noted that business owners on Stuart Avenue and the "The Thirsty Dragon," likely experience the direct impact of this need when large crowds gather for community activities, suggesting that permanent bathrooms would be a beneficial investment for the area's growing popularity.

Commissioner Gillespie also highlighted the upcoming Martin Luther King Jr. Day celebrations, encouraging the community to participate in the week's scheduled events. She specifically mentioned the annual gospel singing performance and the slate of activities occurring on the holiday itself, including a community breakfast at the Austin Center, a parade, and a commemorative service in the afternoon. She said that the schedule has been widely publicized online and urged residents to continue spreading the word.

Commissioner Thompson addressed the request for permanent downtown restrooms, noting a potential misunderstanding between temporary event requirements and permanent structures. While the city currently mandates additional portable toilets for large events, Commissioner Thompson expressed skepticism regarding a permanent solution. He cited concerns over the loss of valuable parking spaces, the aesthetic impact on the downtown area, and significant budgetary constraints. He suggested that while a long-term solution might be explored in tandem with future developments like the hotel project, it is not currently a simple or immediate fix.

Commissioner Thompson reinforced the importance of the upcoming Martin Luther King Jr. Day celebrations, providing additional details on the schedule, including a potluck at First Institutional on Thursday and an oratory contest at the Austin Center on Friday. He noted that this year's celebration would be particularly poignant as the community grieves the loss of John Kimbrough. Thompson emphasized that the community's participation is a vital way to honor Kimbrough's contributions and find collective strength during a period of mourning.

Commissioner Thompson agreed with the need for more garbage cans to encourage better litter management and keep the streets clean. He urged the city to move quickly on this initiative, suggesting that both residents and business owners would appreciate a more proactive approach to keeping the downtown area tidy.

Chair Gibson gave an update on the Walesbilt Hotel.

Chair Gibson reported that the administration has been working extensively to finalize the process for the Walesbilt Hotel renovation, noting that the project is now entering a critical decision-making phase. The project is led by Restoration St. Louis, a developer with a successful track record in historic preservation. The financial viability of the hotel depends heavily on historic tax credits. Because current laws require these investments to be entirely private to qualify for credits, the city's financial contribution will be structured as a grant rather than a direct investment. The city expects to recover this money through the tax increment generated by the projected increase in the property's value, following the successful model established by the Lake Wales Connected downtown improvements.

To ensure fiscal responsibility, the city manager has hired Place Economics to conduct an independent study on the return on investment. This study, expected in mid-February, will analyze job creation, visitor spending, and the anticipated increase in property tax revenue. Chair Gibson emphasized that he insisted on this validation to guarantee that the public funds are being used effectively and will eventually be paid back through the tax base. Although the city had hoped to have contracts signed by the end of 2025, negotiations regarding specific details are still ongoing and remain confidential for the time being.

A major component of the plan involves the acquisition of adjoining property to allow the hotel to function as a regional event center. The city intends to transfer a half-acre lot for valet parking and is currently working on a property swap with the Care Center. This swap involves the city providing the Care Center with a new, renovated facility in exchange for their current land, which the hotel needs for an event courtyard and lawn. While the cost of the replacement facility may exceed the current appraised value of the Care Center land, the acquisition is considered essential for the hotel to meet the standards of the Marriott Signature Collection. Chair Gibson characterized the upcoming final decision on this project as the most significant for the community in decades.

Commissioner Gillespie asked for clarification on the logistics of the property acquisition involving the Care Center. Chair Gibson explained that the city would likely supply the funds for a property acquisition or reimburse the Care Center for a swap, ensuring the hotel project has the land it needs for essential operations. This process has been kept confidential to prevent market speculation. Chair Gibson emphasized that the Care Center board has the final word on the conveyance, noting that the city is committed to ensuring they are not financially harmed by the transition. The plan includes factoring in moving expenses and potential loss of business time to ensure the exchange is fair and collaborative.

Commissioner Thompson raised the point that the upcoming decision is historic and suggested that the city also quantify the negative economic impact of doing nothing with the hotel. He noted that the community has seen the effects of inaction for many years. Chair Gibson agreed, stating that the independent economic study would validate the anticipated returns and use cases like the Gulfstream Hotel in Lake Worth as a benchmark. He highlighted that the city's ownership of the hotel, secured over a two-year acquisition period, puts them in a much stronger position than other municipalities that have had to deal with private owners or price gouging during similar renovations.

Mayor Hilligoss expressed support for the economic study, noting that the data will be vital for the board to make an informed decision and to communicate the justification for such a large investment to the public. Chair Gibson added that public transparency is a primary goal of this discussion, as the funds being used belong to the citizens. He stressed the importance of having a recorded, accurate account of the plans so the media and the public can access the same information simultaneously.

City Manager James Slaton shared his optimism regarding the project's progress despite the complexities of federal tax credits and IRS regulations. He mentioned that the administration has worked through various partnership structures to overcome these obstacles. While noting that other areas like Lake Worth Beach have access to certain county-level incentives that Lake Wales does not currently have, Slaton remains confident in the established relationships and the path forward for the hotel renovation.

10. ADJOURN

The meeting was adjourned at 3:28 p.m.

Chair/Vice-Chair

ATTEST:

City Clerk/Deputy City Clerk