

Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA)
Meeting Minutes February 10, 2026
(DRAFT)

2/10/2026 - Minutes

1. CALL TO ORDER & ROLL CALL

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

Members Absent: Daniel Williams

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

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

2. COMMENTS AND PETITIONS

Julie Conrad, Superintendent of Lake Wales Charter Schools, shared about legislation in Tallahassee to help with Capital Improvements at Charter conversion schools and encouraged everyone to contact legislators on this.

3. Minutes - January 13, 2026

Commissioner Thompson made a motion to approve the minutes of January 13, 2026. Mayor Hilligoss seconded the motion.

by voice vote:

Commissioner Thompson "YES"

Mayor Hilligoss "YES"

Commissioner Gillespie "YES"

Chair Gibson "YES"

Motion passed 4-0.

4. Final Acceptance Of Mural In Downtown

[Begin Agenda Memo]

SYNOPSIS: The Board will review the Mural to ensure completion

RECOMMENDATION CRA acknowledges completion of the artwork and confirms that services as required have been completed.

BACKGROUND Paul O'Neill and Alexa Scheipsmeier have completed the mural on Park/1st St. Per the agreement, acceptance of the Mural by the CRA is required prior to city making final payment.

OTHER OPTIONS None recommended

FISCAL IMPACT \$17,500 and ongoing maintenance if required. Amount authorized for entire project was \$35,000 (½ upfront and at completion).

[End Agenda Memo]

Sara Irvine, Special Projects Administrator, reviewed this item.

Paul O'Neill, mural artist, shared about the mural and thanked the board for the opportunity. Commissioner Gillespie asked what a wavy line represented. Mr. O'Neill said it had no specific meaning it is abstract art.

Commissioner Thompson commended the mural.

Commissioner Gillespie made a motion to accept the mural. Commissioner Thompson seconded the motion.

by voice vote:

Commissioner Gillespie "YES"

Commissioner Thompson "YES"

Mayor Hilligoss "YES"

Chair Gibson "YES"

Motion approved 4-0.

5. Lease Agreement Renewal Between The Lake Wales Community Redevelopment Agency And Lake Wales Charter Schools, Inc. (LWCS)

[Begin Agenda Memo]

SYNOPSIS: Staff is requesting CRA Board approval of a Lease Agreement renewal with the Lake Wales Charter Schools, Inc. for the temporary use of two vacant parcels located on the SW and SE corners of Seminole Avenue and 3rd Street North.

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

1. Approve proposed Lease Agreement renewal with Lake Wales Charter Schools, Inc.

BACKGROUND In 2020, the CRA Board approved a Lease Agreement with Lake Wales Charter Schools, Inc. for the use of two parcels on the southwest and southeast corners of Seminole Avenue and 3rd Street North.

The proposed renewal includes the following changes:

- A 3-year initial term with option to extend the term two (2) times for successive separate periods; provided Landlord approves the applicable extension.
- LWCS may make such alterations, additions, or improvements; however, prior to the expiration of the term of this Lease, LWCS shall restore the parcels to the same prior condition. Since the initial agreement, Lake Wales Charter Schools, Inc. has made an investment to the Bok North Campus in the amount of approximately \$15.5M. Staff believes LWCS has met the following CRA Plan Goals:

- The Agency shall identify community stakeholders and partners to assist in the implementation of the Redevelopment Goals, Objectives, and Projects.

- Preserve and maintain historic and architecturally significant structures within the redevelopment area.

OTHER OPTIONS Do not approve Lease Agreement Renewal with Lake Wales Charter Schools, Inc.

FISCAL IMPACT If approved, the lease will generate a one-time sum of \$10.00 for the CRA Trust Fund.

[End Agenda Memo]

Deena Drumgo, Assistant City Manager, reviewed this item.

Commissioner Gillespie asked about the investment amount in an empty lot. Ms. Drumgo clarified that the investment is in the entire campus.

Mayor Hilligoss made a motion to approve the lease agreement. 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.

6. EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S REPORT

Executive Director James Slaton announced a significant wave of upcoming media coverage focusing on the downtown CRA district. Local news station Channel 28 is scheduled to broadcast three different segments from the downtown area during their morning news on the 27th. This is part of a broader series of ten follow-up stories, including a feature on the recent groundbreaking ceremony in the Northwest neighborhood.

On a national level, Lake Wales will be featured on the program "The American Dream" on the 15th of this month. The show travels across the country highlighting approximately four unique communities per episode. Slaton participated in the filming to represent the city's progress and vision. The episode is slated for initial release on major streaming platforms, including Roku, Apple TV, and Amazon Prime.

The Executive Director noted that these features often lead to even wider distribution, as the program is frequently picked up by major networks such as the Discovery Channel, the Travel Channel, and CNBC. He advised the Commission and the community to be prepared for the increased visibility and national exposure that will result from these broadcasts.

Executive Director James Slaton provided a firm assurance that the restoration of the Walesbilt Hotel will proceed, despite the inherent complexities of the project. He noted that while the timeline remains fluid to avoid the pitfalls of previous public commitments, significant progress is being made. The deal is particularly intricate due to the intersection of Florida Constitutional law, CRA statutes, historic tax credits, and IRS regulations. Slaton expects to have a more definitive framework for the public-private partnership structure by the end of the current week.

To support the financial and logistical aspects of the project, the CRA has engaged Place Economics to conduct an economic impact study specifically focused on historic hotel restorations. This report is expected shortly and will help establish a safe budget for the CRA's contribution. Additionally, boundary surveys and legal descriptions for the hotel property and the surrounding block have been completed to facilitate a faster transaction once the partnership is finalized.

A major focus of the current phase is the remediation of the hotel's interior. Chair Gibson described the building's condition as "astounding," with rubble—including concrete blocks and plaster—piled waist-high on several floors due to previous owners. Slaton argued that since the CRA will be a contributing partner anyway, it is in the city's best interest to fund the debris removal now. This "clean slate" approach is intended to shorten the eventual construction timeline and make the project more attractive to developers.

Regarding the development partners, Mr. Slaton confirmed that while they are currently negotiating with Restoration St. Louis, the CRA has established contingency plans. If a contract cannot be finalized with the primary firm, they are prepared to move to a second firm or pursue other alternatives. Finally, a key update was provided regarding the Lake Wales Care Center; a sale and purchase agreement for the thrift store property is expected to be ready for approval at the March 10th CRA meeting, removing a significant hurdle for the hotel block's redevelopment.

7. BOARD MEMBER COMMENTS

Commissioner Thompson expressed strong support for the local charter school system and highlighted an upcoming "Snack and Chat" town hall meeting scheduled for February 24th at the New Divine Church of God. He emphasized that as Lake Wales experiences a gradual demographic shift and population growth, it is vital for the city to remain an engaged partner in education. Thompson noted that the visionary planning currently underway is essential to ensuring new residents have clear expectations and quality options for their children's schooling.

Mayor Hilligoss discussed the city's physical transformations, noting the official kickoff of the Northwest sidewalk projects and the completion of a new mural downtown. He characterized the current period as a high-activity era for Lake Wales, citing multiple ribbon cuttings and ongoing infrastructure improvements as evidence of the city's positive momentum.

There was discussion of impending retirement of Chairman Gibson from the City Commission. Commissioner Gillespie proposed discussing expanding the CRA board by one seat to allow Gibson to remain active in the agency. The proposal aims to preserve Gibson's "depth of experience and knowledge" specifically regarding ongoing CRA projects. While the board expressed a desire to retain his expertise, it was noted that any change to the board's composition is a decision for the City Commission rather than the CRA itself, and thus must be formally addressed at a future City Commission work session or meeting.

8. ADJOURN

Meeting was adjourned at 3:33 p.m.

Chair/Vice-Chair

ATTEST:

City Clerk/Deputy City Clerk