

Commission Workshop

Meeting Minutes

February 11, 2026

(APPROVED)

2/11/2026 - Minutes

1. CALL TO ORDER & ROLL CALL

Members Present: Mayor Jack Hilligoss, Robin Gibson, Daniel Williams, Keith Thompson, Carol Gillespie

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

Mayor Hilligoss called the meeting to order at approximately 2:00 p.m.

2. Presentation - EDC/Chamber Of Commerce

Skip Alford, President of Lake Wales Area Chamber of Commerce & EDC, gave a quarterly report.

State & Regional Economic Overview

- **Economic Strength:** Florida's economy is currently the 4th largest in the U.S., with a GDP of 1.63 and approximately 10 million total jobs.
- **Population Trends:** While the state continues to grow, the rate of new residents has slowed from 1,000 per day to between 500–600. Mr. Alford noted this "breather" allows infrastructure and planning to catch up with demand.
- **Local Demographics:** The Lake Wales workforce population is approximately 18,800, with earning power currently trailing the county average by about \$10,000.

The "Ready Workforce" Initiative

- **Pipeline Strategy:** Mr. Alford emphasized a shift from a "working" workforce to a "ready" workforce—individuals with specific skills, literacy, and the ability to follow complex directions.
- **Education Partnership:** The EDC is collaborating with Dr. Julie Conrad (Lake Wales Charter Schools) to align pre-K through 12th-grade pathways with the top 10 job sectors projected for the next 20 years.
- **High-Wage Targets:** The goal is to attract industries with wages \$20,000+ above the current median to fund local projects and increase disposable income.

Industrial Recruitment & Infrastructure

- **Infrastructure as a Catalyst:** Mr. Alford praised the City Manager for prioritizing infrastructure, stating that manufacturers demand "certainty and low risk."
- **Move-In Readiness:** A critical gap was identified: the city is losing leads because it lacks "move-in ready" existing structures. Companies are now looking for speed-to-market (some requiring occupancy by Q1 2026/2027).
- **Shovel-Ready Sites:** The EDC is exploring "spec" buildings and small business centers to

compete for these leads.

- The Hunt Brothers Corridor: This area is being positioned as a "southern buffer" against urban sprawl, intended to host a mix of manufacturing, logistics, and professional services (including a potential small hospital).

Economic Strategy: Rooftops vs. Earning Power

- Beyond Housing: While Lake Wales has seen significant residential growth (approx. 1,200 permits in 5 years), Mr. Alford cautioned that rooftops alone do not create economic strength; the focus must remain on the "spending power" inside those homes.
- Lead Management: Mr. Alford shared examples of recent leads:
- Successes: Potential projects bringing 400+ jobs with \$69k+ average wages.
- Declines: Several leads (9k–12k sq. ft. requirements) were turned away due to lack of available warehouse space or "hazardous" classifications (chemicals/explosives) that do not fit the city's vision.

The Critical Role of Infrastructure

Mr. Alford emphasized that infrastructure is the single most important factor in securing new business for Lake Wales.

- Lead Requirements: Roughly 85% of industrial leads specifically seek sites where infrastructure is already installed and ready for immediate marketing.
- Expansion Support: He urged city leadership to prioritize and fund the City Manager's infrastructure expansion requests, describing them as "absolutely critical" for the future of the community.

Update on ADS (Advanced Drainage Systems)

In response to questions regarding the progress of the ADS pipe plant, Mr. Alford provided a status update:

- Current Status: There is currently no new information or timeline from ADS.
- Ongoing Advocacy: Mr. Alford noted that he is in frequent contact with the company, "begging" for updates to provide to the Commission, but the company has not yet provided a definitive answer.

The "Multiplier Effect" of Local Jobs

Mr. Alford concluded with a powerful illustration of how industrial growth impacts the local economy beyond the initial paycheck.

- Hypothetical Model: He used the example of 40 workers earning \$17 per hour.
- Compounding Impact: If those employees spend their wages within the Lake Wales community, the economic compounding effect results in approximately \$5.9 million in circulating revenue for the town.
- Key Takeaway: This "stickiness" of revenue demonstrates why opening facilities like the pipe plant is essential for the city's financial vitality.

3. Developer Credit Agreement -Hunt Club Grove South

[Begin Agenda Memo]

SYNOPSIS: The city requested developer provide some off-site improvement in relationship to the Hunt Club Grove South development.

RECOMMENDATION Approve the Developer Credit Agreement for Hunt Club Grove South and authorize The Mayor to execute the agreement.

BACKGROUND City code Section 23-770 allows the city to provide developer credit for approved offsite public facilities. The city has requested that the developer construct an extension of Post Salter Road and provide an extension of the city's reclaim water distribution line in the area. Developer has provided a cost estimate to complete the requested upgrades.

FISCAL IMPACT Developer Credit reduces multi-modal Impact fees at time home building permits are issued, not to exceed a total of \$1,230,701 or the amount collectable in the HCG South development. Developer Credit reduces Sewer Impact fees at time home building permits are issued, not to exceed a total of \$415,375.03 or the amount collectable in the HCG South development.

[End Agenda Memo]

Sara Irvine, Special Projects Administrator, reviewed this item.

Commissioner Gillespie asked if impact fees are determined at the time development is approved. Ms. Irvine said no they are collected at the time of permitting. These may get increased by the time these are credited.

4. Law Enforcement Vehicle Purchase

[Begin Agenda Memo]

SYNOPSIS: Staff is requesting Commission approval to lease purchase seven (7) police vehicles using the Bancorp Master Lease Agreement and dispose of ten (10) surplus vehicles.

RECOMMENDATION It is recommended that the City Commission take the following action(s):

1. Approve the sixty (60) month lease-purchase of five (5) fully equipped 2026 Chevrolet police patrol vehicles from Stingray Chevrolet using the Florida Sheriff's Association Bid FSA25-Vel33.0 pricing and the sixty (60) month of two (2) 2026 Ford Mustang marked police vehicles fully equipped and with speed measuring equipment from Weikert Ford using Polk County Contract pricing.
2. Authorize the City Manager to execute the necessary documents on behalf of the city.
3. Classify the ten (10) below listed vehicles as surplus. 4. Authorize staff to dispose of the surplus vehicles.

BACKGROUND

Within the FY 2025/26 annual budget, the City Commission approved \$490,000.00 for purchase of police vehicles. The FY 2025/26 annual budget indicated the vehicles would be leased versus purchased with commission approval.

Staff recommends the lease-purchase of the following vehicles:

- Five (5) fully equipped 2026 Chevrolet Tahoe police vehicles. The capital cost of these vehicles, if purchased outright, would be \$378,150.10. Under the lease/purchase agreement, the monthly lease payment would be \$7,274.25 for sixty (60) months, with a total cost of \$436,455.00. These vehicles will replace police vehicles being removed from service through reassignment, sale or other means of disposal.
- Two (2) fully equipped 2026 Ford Mustang police vehicles. The capital cost of these vehicles, if purchased outright, would be \$123,664.08. Under the lease/purchase agreement, the monthly lease payment would be \$2,378.86 for sixty (60) months, with a total cost of \$142,731.60. These vehicles will be fully equipped as

police vehicles and used by the Traffic Enforcement Unit with speed measuring equipment.

- The vehicles outlined below no longer serve any useful purpose to the city and staff recommends approval to dispose of them.

YEAR MAKE MODEL VIN NUMBER

2008 Ford F150 1FTPX14V18FB74562

2015 Chevrolet Impala 2G1WD5E33F1160703

2015 Ford Interceptor (Marked K9) 1FM5K8ARXFGB41021

2016 Chevrolet Impala 2G1WD5E34G1139151

2016 Chevrolet Impala 2G1WD5E34G1143295

2016 Chevrolet Impala 2G1WD5E3XG1139249

2016 Ford Interceptor (Marked K9) 1FM5K8AR0GGB35794

2018 Ford Interceptor (Unmarked Silver) 1FM5K8AR6JGA83286

2018 Ford Interceptor (Unmarked Gray) 1FM5K8AR1JGA71417

2018 Ford Interceptor (Unmarked Gray) 1FM5K8AR3JGA71418

OTHER OPTIONS 1) Purchase the police vehicles outright at a cost of \$501,814.18.

FISCAL IMPACT The FY25/26 lease obligation of \$137,462.06 (60 months) provided by Bancorp is based upon a lease-purchase option for public safety vehicles. If the City Commission approves the vehicle lease agreement, the city is committed to a yearly lease payment of \$115,837.32 for the sixty (60) month lease. If revenues are insufficient in future years, the city has the option to return the vehicles under the nonappropriation of funds clause. If it becomes necessary to exercise this option the police department would suffer the loss of the vehicles

[End Agenda Memo]

Lt. Figueroa, Police Department, reviewed this item.

Commissioner Gillespie asked about using Electric vehicles. Lt. Figueroa said they looked into using electric vehicles but decided against them citing a critical lack of supporting infrastructure and concerns over operational reliability during emergencies. Drawing from experiences with past hurricanes, James Slaton, City Manager, emphasized that power outages are a certainty in the region, and public safety units must remain functional even when the electrical grid fails. Until EV technology can match the resilience of petroleum-based engines in disaster scenarios, the department will continue to utilize traditional fuel sources to ensure uninterrupted service to the community. Commissioner Gillespie said that gas might not be available during a disaster. Mr. Slaton said it is not a problem for us as we have our own fuel farm.

Deputy Mayor Gibson asked about funding. Lt. Figueroa said these are in the budget.

5. Approval Of Excavator Purchase From Bobcat

[Begin Agenda Memo]

SYNOPSIS: Staff requests commission approval to purchase an excavator from Bobcat to be able to complete everyday utility work within the Water Department.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION It is recommended that the City Commission consider taking the following action:

1. Approve the excavator purchase of \$54,334.06 from Bobcat to assist in functions of the Water department.

BACKGROUND Utility companies need mini excavators to have the ability to work in tight residential spaces to efficiently dig trenches for new lines (water, sewer), perform precision digging to locate existing utilities, and handle repairs with minimal disruption. This piece of equipment is essential for installing and maintaining underground infrastructure where large machines are unable to fit. Their compact size reduces ground damage, speeds up work, and allows for easier transport between diverse job sites. The current budget has \$80,000.00 allocated for the purchase of an excavator. Staff recommends the commission take the following action, approve the purchase of an excavator from Bobcat Equipment in the amount of \$54,334.06.

OTHER OPTIONS The Commission could choose to instruct staff not to purchase the equipment, thus hindering the productivity of staff.

FISCAL IMPACT \$80,000 was placed in the current Capital Improvement Plan for the mini excavator.

[End Agenda Memo]

Holly Britt, Utilities Operations Manager, reviewed this item.

Commissioner Gillespie asked about the old one. Ms. Britt said that will be used as a backup.

6. Authorization To Proceed With Solid Waste Collection In-House Feasibility Study

[Begin Agenda Memo]

SYNOPSIS: Staff is requesting authorization to proceed with a Solid Waste Collection InHouse Feasibility Study to evaluate the operational, financial, and service impacts of providing solid waste collection services directly by the City as an alternative to the current contracted franchise model.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION Staff recommends the City Commission consider taking the following action:

1. Authorize the City to proceed with a Solid Waste Collection In-House Feasibility Study as outlined in the attached task authorization with Raftelis Financial Consultants, Inc., in an amount not to exceed \$65,470.
2. Authorize the City Manager to execute the necessary contract documents on behalf of the City.

BACKGROUND The City of Lake Wales is currently served through an exclusive solid waste collection franchise agreement with Republic Services. As the City continues to evaluate long-term service delivery options, staff identified the need to assess whether providing solid waste collection services inhouse could be a viable and cost-effective alternative. As the City continues to evaluate long-term service delivery options, staff identified the need to better understand whether providing solid waste collection services in-house could be a viable alternative to the current contracted franchise model. While some municipalities operate in-house solid waste programs and others utilize contracted services, staff does not currently have sufficient comparative data to evaluate the operational, financial, and service-level impacts of each approach as applied to Lake Wales. To ensure informed decision-making, staff is proposing a feasibility study to objectively evaluate in-house solid waste collection as a potential option, including associated costs, staffing requirements, infrastructure needs, transition considerations, and long-term operational impacts, and to compare those findings to the City's existing service model.

OTHER OPTION The City Commission may choose not to proceed with the feasibility study and continue operating under the existing franchise model without further evaluation of alternative service delivery options. In doing so, the City would forego an opportunity to assess potential operational efficiencies, service accountability considerations, workforce implications, and long-term financial impacts that could be associated with other service delivery models.

FISCAL IMPACT The proposed feasibility study has a not-to-exceed cost of \$65,470. Funding for the study has been assigned within the capital improvement schedule.

[End Agenda Memo]

Nancy Hernandez, Public Works Operations Manager, reviewed this item.

Public Works Operations Manager Nancy Hernandez expressed optimism regarding the study to bring solid waste collection in-house, noting that neighboring cities like Sebring and Lake Hamilton have achieved lower rates through municipal operations. Deputy Mayor Gibson shared an idea about a robust local network that could potentially include specialized recycling partnerships—such as providing materials to local manufacturing plants. James Slaton, City Manager, said recent increases encouraged him to want to investigate this. This was discussed.

7. Stormwater Equipment Acquisition – Combination Sweeper With Vacuum-Assisted Capability

[Begin Agenda Memo]

SYNOPSIS: Staff is requesting authorization to procure a combination street sweeper equipped with vacuum-assisted (vacator-style) storm drain cleaning capabilities to enhance the City's stormwater response capacity.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION Staff recommends the City Commission consider taking the following action:

1. Authorize the City to piggyback the Florida Sheriffs Association cooperative purchasing contract (FSA Bid No. FSA23-EQU21.0) for the acquisition of equipment.
2. Authorize the City to proceed with the purchase of a combination sweeper through Container Systems & Equipment Co., Inc., utilizing the cooperative contract.
3. Authorize the City Manager to execute all necessary agreements and related documents on behalf of the City.

BACKGROUND The City of Lake Wales currently relies on a contracted vendor for routine street sweeping services. While effective for scheduled maintenance, contracted services are limited in their ability to respond immediately during storm events, emergency flooding conditions, or situations requiring subsurface storm drain cleaning.

Traditional street sweepers operate primarily at the surface level. In contrast, a combination sweeper with vacuum-assisted capability allows for the removal of debris and obstructions below storm drain grates and inlets—an essential function during heavy rainfall events when rapid debris removal can significantly reduce localized flooding risks. As the City continues to strengthen its internal stormwater operations, staff has identified this equipment as a strategic asset that would allow Public Works to respond more quickly during storm events, support emergency operations, and reduce reliance on delayed or unavailable contracted services during critical periods.

This equipment is not intended to replace the City's existing sweeping contract. Rather, it would be deployed selectively for emergency response, post-storm cleanup, and targeted drainage maintenance where immediate action is required.

FISCAL IMPACT Staff evaluated multiple acquisition options, including outright purchase and vendor-provided financing, and determined that a municipal lease through Bancorp best balances fiscal impact, cash preservation, and long-term asset ownership.

[End Agenda Memo]

Nancy Hernandez, Public Works Operations Manager, reviewed this item. Commissioner Gillespie asked for clarification as to why this would not replace the contract. Ms. Hernandez said it wouldn't have the capacity.

8. ORDINANCE 2026-02, Amending Chapter 10, Fire Prevention, Lake Wales Code Of Ordinances – 2nd Reading And Public Hearing

[Begin Agenda memo]

SYNOPSIS The amendment will update Section 1 of Chapter 10 to achieve compliance with State Statute. STAFF

RECOMMENDATION It is recommended that the City Commission adopt Ordinance 2026-02 after second reading and public hearing.

BACKGROUND Section 10-1 previously adopted a specific edition of a fire prevention code as the minimum fire safety standard for the City. Pursuant to Florida Statute 633.025 and Florida Administrative Code 69A-60.002, the Florida Fire Prevention Code, as adopted by the State of Florida, is the minimum fire prevention code deemed adopted by each municipality, county, and special district with fire safety responsibilities. To maintain consistency with state law, eliminate conflicts between local and state requirements, and ensure enforceability at the local level, Section 10- 1 must reflect adoption of the same fire prevention code currently adopted and enforced by the State of Florida. Aligning the City's code with the State's adopted code allows for local enforcement and avoids the need for non-compliance matters to be adjudicated solely through the county court system.

OPTIONS None. Approval of Ordinance 2026-02 will bring the City into compliance with Florida Statute.

[End Agenda Memo]

Jonathan Smith, Fire Chief, reviewed this item.

9. Event Permit Application: Good Morning Lake Wales February 27, 2026

[Begin Agenda Memo]

SYNOPSIS This is a request from the City of Lake Wales Communications, to host an event downtown called Good Morning Lake Wales: ABC 28 Tampa Bay Live Broadcast on Thursday February 27. This event will involve closure of the Marketplace and Park Avenue from 5:00 a.m. – 10:30 a.m.

RECOMMENDATION Staff recommends

1. That the City Commission approve the permit request to host an event downtown called Good Morning Lake Wales: ABC 28 Tampa Bay Live Broadcast on Thursday February 27.
2. That the City Commission approve the closure of a portion of Park Avenue between Scenic HWY and N Market St.

BACKGROUND The City of Lake Wales is proposing to host an event downtown called Good Morning Lake Wales: ABC 28 Tampa Bay Live Broadcast on Thursday February 27. This event will involve closure of the

Marketplace and Park Avenue from 5:00 a.m. – 10:30 a.m.

OTHER OPTIONS Do not approve the Special Event Permit.

FISCAL IMPACT Unknown.

[End Agenda Memo]

Jennifer Nanek, City Clerk, reviewed this item.

10. Event Permit: Freedom Fest Juneteenth Concert

[Begin Agenda Memo]

SYNOPSIS: A special event permit application to sponsor a Juneteenth Concert on June 19, 2026 from 5:45 p.m. – 9:00 p.m. This event will include alcohol.

RECOMMENDATION Staff recommends:

1. Approval of the Special Event permit for the Juneteenth Concert on June 13, 2025 from 5:45 p.m. and 9:00 p.m.
2. Approve the serving of alcohol within the designated boundaries.

BACKGROUND The Juneteenth Lake Wales LLC/Lincoln Community Development Corporation has submitted a special event permit application to sponsor a Juneteenth Concert on June 19, 2026. Event hours are 5:45 p.m. – 9:00 p.m. Set up will begin at 8:00 a.m. The event will include alcohol, DJ, live music, and food.

OTHER OPTIONS Do not approve the permit.

FISCAL IMPACT None. The Juneteenth Lake Wales LLC./ Lincoln Community Development Corporation will cover costs of off duty police.

[End Agenda Memo]

Jennifer Nanek, City Clerk, reviewed this item.

11. Special Event Permit Juneteenth Street Fair

[Begin Agenda Memo]

SYNOPSIS: A special event permit application to sponsor a Juneteenth Street Fair on June 20, 2026. This event will require the closing of Lincoln Avenue between D Street and B Street from 12:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m. This event will include alcohol.

RECOMMENDATION Staff recommends:

1. Approval of the Special Event permit for the Juneteenth Street Fair on June 20, 2026 from 3:00 p.m. and 9:00 p.m.
2. Approval to close Lincoln Avenue between D Street and B Street from 12:00 p.m. – 10:00 p.m. 3. Approve the serving of alcohol within the designated boundaries.

BACKGROUND The Juneteenth Lake Wales LLC/Lincoln Community Development Corporation has

submitted a special event permit application to sponsor a Juneteenth Street Fair on June 14, 2025. Event hours are 3:00 p.m. – 7:00 p.m. Set up will begin at 10:00 a.m. This event will require the closing of Lincoln Avenue from D Street to B Street from 10:00 a.m. – 10:00 p.m. The event will include alcohol, DJ, live music, vendors and food trucks

OTHER OPTIONS Do not approve the permit.

FISCAL IMPACT The Juneteenth Lake Wales LLC./ Lincoln Community Development Corporation will reimburse the City 25% of Public Services and Police costs.

[End Agenda Memo]

Jennifer Nanek, City Clerk, reviewed this item.

12. Board Appointments –Code Enforcement

[Begin Agenda Memo]

SYNOPSIS: Appointment to fill a vacancy due to expiration of terms and resignations.

RECOMMENDATION Staff recommends that the Mayor and Commission to make the following appointments as deemed appropriate.

1. Appoint Fabiola Valencia to a term on the Code Enforcement Board to expire 7/1/2026 and to an additional term to expire 7/1/2029

BACKGROUND Code Enforcement Board (City Code Sec. 2-56) – The board consists of seven (7) members. Whenever possible, membership shall include an architect, a businessperson, an engineer, a general contractor, a subcontractor, and a realtor. Members must be residents. (3-year term) 2 alternates can also be appointed.

- An interview process is necessary for new applicants only.
- Members are required to file an annual Form 1, Statement of Financial Interests
- Current Vacancies: 4 regular seats and 2 alternate seats There is a vacancy on the Code Enforcement Board due to resignation.

Current Members: Dwight Wilson, resident 07/01/24 – 07/01/27 3

Courtney Schmitt, resident 07/01/24 – 07/01/27, 2

Curtis Gibson, resident 07/01/2022 – 07/01/25, 1

Ralph E. Marino, resident 07/01/22 – 07/01/25, 3

Bruce Austell, resident 07/01/25 – 07/01/28 P+2

Julia Paul, resident, (alternate 2) 02/18/20 – 07/01/23 P

Sara Jones, resident 07/01/24 – 07/01/2027 3

Cathy Hammel 07/01/25 - 07/01/28 1

Mark Bennett 03/08/23-7/1/2025 P

Applying for Appointment: Fabiola Valencia to a term to expire 7/1/2026 and an additional full term to expire 7/1/2029 The Code Board recommends this Appointment

OPTIONS Do not appoint those that have applied.

FISCAL IMPACT None. These are volunteer boards.

[End Agenda Memo]

Jennifer Nanek, City Clerk, reviewed this item.

13. Discussion - Pledge For Clean Campaigns

[Begin Memo]

The pledge submitted herewith for your consideration is a slightly revised version of the pledge previously submitted by Vice Mayor Gibson but withdrawn by him before the Commission could act on it. I commend the Vice Mayor for his thoughtful craftsmanship in preparing the pledge and trust that my revision will help to address any concerns raised in our discussion of the original version.

The need for this pledge arose from the extensive use of "dark money" in recent commission elections. Florida law requires that materials distributed by a candidate for public office identify the person or organization publishing the materials, including the candidate's official campaign organization. This requirement helps to ensure that voters will know what interest groups are helping to elect local candidates so that they can determine whether the candidate may be biased in favor of those special interests. However, if a third party or a political action committee not affiliated with a candidate publishes materials supporting the candidate, only the third party's name is required. Although the reporting rules for third party PAC's do require certain financial disclosures, in practice, the information publicly available regarding the funding of these PACs does not disclose the interests that organized the PAC or the individuals who contributed to it. In order to avoid disclosing the true sources of their funding, the PACs adopt ambiguous names such as "Citizens for Good Government," which may very well be a pseudonym for a special interest group seeking to influence local government by electing candidates sympathetic to their views.

In a town the size of Lake Wales, it is difficult for candidates lacking special interest funding to compete with candidates whose campaigns are heavily funded by third party PACs. An individual who must rely on donations by his or her supporters cannot approach the amount of funding provided by a dark money PAC and therefore cannot nearly match the expenditures made on behalf of candidates supported by the PAC's. As a result, our elections are not fair but are influenced by the special interests that fund the PAC's, to the detriment of candidates who lack such funding.

The proposed pledge will not remedy this disparity, but it may cause candidates to be more careful in their actions regarding third party PAC's. My revision to this pledge does not make the candidate responsible for the accuracy of materials distributed by third parties, but only for those published by their own campaigns. The pledge is not legally binding, but by requesting candidates to read and sign it, the pledge will make them aware that in our city, we are serious about holding elections that are fair to all and are not biased in favor of special interests who hope to procure favors from the candidates whom they support. By making this request, we are not trying to get any candidate into trouble, but rather to make all candidates appreciate the important roles that they play in ensuring that Lake Wales elections are fair and responsive to the needs of our citizens rather than to the interests of moneyed groups supporting any one candidate.

[End Agenda Memo]

Commissioner Gillespie reviewed this item.

Deputy Mayor Gibson expressed support for Commissioner Gillespie's revised campaign pledge, noting that

a voluntary pledge is more effective and less litigious than a formal law or plan. His primary critique focuses on the need for stricter definitions regarding the "origin of funds" to prevent donors from hiding behind vague entity names, often referred to as dark money. Gibson argues that for a pledge to be truly persuasive to voters, it must require disclosure of the specific individuals or entities providing the capital, rather than just the immediate source. Ultimately, he believes a pledge serves as a powerful accountability tool, as a candidate's knowing violation of such a commitment could significantly influence public trust and voting behavior.

Commissioner Thompson said there is a legal wall between candidates and third-party PACs. He argued that since coordination is strictly illegal, candidates are often genuinely unaware of the origins of attack ads. Consequently, requiring a candidate to account for the "origin" of dark money is not only impossible but could potentially lead a candidate to inadvertently violate campaign finance laws if they were to seek out that information.

Mayor Hilligoss expanded on these concerns, labeling the pledge as both redundant and dangerously subjective. He said that transparency is already a legal requirement and that the pledge's language—specifically terms like "fear-mongering" and "respectful dialogue"—is too vague to be enforced fairly. The Mayor expressed a strong fear that the pledge would be "weaponized" by political opponents, who would use subjective interpretations of the text to attack one another on social media. From his perspective, the pledge would not remedy the issue of dark money; instead, it would create a reactionary environment that might discourage qualified individuals from running for office due to the threat of public retaliation.

Commissioner Gillespie championed the pledge as a tool for moral clarity. She argued that even if a candidate cannot control a third-party group, they should be willing to publicly and effectively denounce dishonest or "nasty" campaign tactics used in their favor. She maintained that the pledge would serve as a crucial signal to voters, providing them with a way to hold candidates accountable for the tenor of the election. Commissioner Gillespie said a candidate's refusal to reject toxic support is a character issue that the electorate deserves to know about before heading to the polls.

Deputy Mayor Gibson expressed sympathy for Gillespie's goals, he ultimately sided with the Mayor and Commissioner Thompson, concluding that the practicalities of the pledge would likely create more problems than they solved. Commissioner Thompson said that the ultimate "veto power" lies with the voters, who must use their own judgment to evaluate candidates and the ads that support them. He suggested that the most the commission should do is establish a set of "aspirational community standards" to outline preferred campaign behavior without requiring a formal, signed commitment.

Commissioner Gillespie formally requested that the pledge be placed on the regular commission agenda, arguing that the issue had not yet been properly vetted in a public forum. She contended that by blocking the item from a formal meeting based on the informal consensus of a work session, the commission was effectively disenfranchising citizens and preventing them from participating in the decision-making process. Commissioner Gillespie asserted her right to bring the issue forward regardless of the Commission's opposition.

Deputy Mayor Gibson noted that the city administration, specifically the City Manager, is responsible for shaping the agenda. Slaton indicated he would not advance the item without a clear consensus from the commission, effectively placing the burden back on the board. This created a unique role reversal that Deputy Mayor Gibson found "entertaining," observing that while the City Manager usually asks the commission for recommendations on delicate issues, in this instance, the commission was providing no clear direction, leaving the decision of whether to move forward entirely in the City Manager's hands.

14. Discussion - Modifying The CRA

The commission discussed a proposal to expand the Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA) board to seven members, which would allow Deputy Mayor Robin Gibson to continue serving on the board after leaving the City Commission. City Manager James Slaton outlined the statutory requirements for this expansion, noting it would involve mandatory four-year terms (with an initial two-year term for the first appointee).

However, Slaton introduced an alternative "potential solution": hiring Gibson as special counsel to the CRA instead of expanding the board. This proposal received enthusiastic support from both the commission and Gibson himself for several reasons:

- **Communication and Mentorship:** Commissioner Thompson expressed excitement that a special counsel role would allow individual commissioners to consult with Gibson privately to "unpack" complex CRA law and history—conversations that are currently restricted while Gibson sits on the board.
- **Expertise without Interference:** Gibson noted that as special counsel, he could provide legal advice and historical context on major projects like the local hotel and CRA initiatives without crossing ethical lines, such as "counting votes" or interfering with the administration's role.
- **Maintaining the "Recipe" for Success:** Gibson emphasized that the current "working relationship" between the commission and the city administration is ideal because everyone "stays in their lane." He suggested that serving as counsel would allow him to support this alignment without introducing the "variables" that come with changing the board's structure.

Mayor Hilligoss and Commissioner Gillespie expressed support for this plan. Deputy Mayor Gibson stated he would be "grateful" for the opportunity to serve in this capacity, particularly given his close connection to the CRA.

15. City Manager Comments

16. CITY COMMISSION AND MAYOR COMMENTS

Commissioner Williams and Deputy Mayor Gibson both focused on the importance of integrity and ethical conduct. Williams expressed excitement about being part of a team that works together without unethical influence, while Gibson explicitly reinforced those statements to close out their portion of the meeting.

Commissioner Thompson discussed the limitations of the Commission's power over development timelines, noting that the "lion's share" of work depends on private equity and business developers. He expressed disappointment that the ADS project has not yet broken ground despite the community's past intensity regarding the project. He emphasized the need to replace the fading citrus economy with a diverse job market to stop citizens from having to commute long distances for living wages.

Commissioner Gillespie raised a challenge regarding the city's "Work Sessions," arguing that preventing the public from speaking and "killing" proposals during these sessions may violate the spirit, if not the letter, of Florida's public meeting laws. She expressed concern that a commissioner's right to bring a proposal to a public vote is being denied if the City Manager or a majority of the board can block it from reaching a formal agenda where the public is allowed to participate.

City Attorney Albert Galloway and Mr. Slaton responded by stating that the current method of setting the agenda is a long-standing practice. They clarified that if a majority of the commission (four out of five) does not wish to move forward with an item during a work session, the administration will not perform the "exercise" of putting it on a formal agenda unless a specific legal reason requires them to do so.

Mayor Hilligoss highlighted the city's strategic infrastructure wins, specifically noting how the use of grants and multimodal fees has allowed for millions of dollars in work on 1st Street with a very small local budget investment. He also defended the city's land planning, explaining that new local road grids are designed to keep traffic off Highway 60. Finally, he announced the launch of a new podcast called "The Mayor and the Manager" to improve communication with citizens.

17. ADJOURN

The meeting was adjourned at 3:31 p.m.

Mayor

ATTEST:

City Clerk