TAVARES CITY COUNCIL
MEETING MINUTES
JULY 16, 2025 – 4:00 PM
TAVARES CITY HALL COUNCIL CHAMBERS
201 EAST MAIN STREET, TAVARES

COUNCIL MEMBERS PRESENT

Walter Price, Mayor
Lori Pfister, Vice Mayor - *Absent*
Sandy Gamble, Council Member
Bob Grenier, Council Member
Troy Singer, Council Member

STAFF PRESENT

John Drury, City Administrator
Lindsay Holt, City Attorney
Susie Novack, City Clerk
Antonio Fabre, Community Development Director
Scott Aldrich, Community Services Director
Bob Tweedie, Economic Development Director
Lori Houghton, Finance Director
Richard Keith, Fire Chief
Crissy Bublitz, Human Resources Director
James Dillon, Public Works Director
Mark O'Keefe, Support Services Director
Sarah Coursey, Police Chief
Phil Clark, Utilities Director

I. CALL TO ORDER

Mayor Price called the meeting to order at 4:00 p.m. He asked those who wished to speak on an agenda item to complete and submit a Request to Speak form.

II. INVOCATION/PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

Tab 1. Pastor Thomas Jay Kowalski, First United Methodist Church of Eustis

Pastor Thomas Jay Kowalski, First United Methodist Church of Eustis, provided the invocation and led those present in the Pledge of Allegiance.

III. APPROVAL OF AGENDA

Mayor Price asked if there were any changes to the Agenda. Mr. Drury said the staff had no changes.

MOTION

Troy Singer moved to approve the Agenda, seconded by Bob Grenier. The motion carried unanimously 4-0.

IV. PROCLAMATIONS/PRESENTATIONS

Tab 2. Election Proclamation

Mayor Price read the following Notice of Election Proclamation in its entirety:

PROCLAMATION
BY ORDER OF THE MAYOR OF THE CITY OF TAVARES

NOTICE OF ELECTION

The 2025 City of Tavares Municipal Election will be held on Tuesday, November 4, 2025, at the Tavares Civic Center (Precinct 360), Tavares Community Church – Activities Center (Precinct 345), Lake County Agriculture Center (Precinct 365), Lake Frances Estates Clubhouse (Precinct 350), Imperial Terrace (Precinct 340), and Royal Harbor Social Hall (Precinct 370), for the purpose of electing two non-partisan Council Members to Seat 2 and Seat 4 to serve at large for the term 2025-2027.

Voters must be registered with the Lake County Supervisor of Elections on or prior to October 6, 2025, at 5:00 p.m.

Nominations to Seat 2 and Seat 4 shall be by petition, signed by at least twenty-five (25) qualified electors of the City of Tavares, and must name the individual and the specific Council seat sought.

A candidate may qualify for only one seat. The petition and all other required election documents must be filed with the City of Tavares City Clerk beginning August 1, 2025, at 12:00 noon and ending August 15, 2025, at 12:00 noon. If August 15th should fall on a weekend day or holiday, the deadline will be extended to the next business day at 12:00 noon. Election packets may be obtained from the City Clerk from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., Monday through Friday, Tavares City Hall, 201 E. Main Street, Tavares.

MOTION

Troy Singer moved to approve the Election Proclamation, seconded by Sandy Gamble. The motion carried unanimously 4-0.

V. SWEARING IN BY CITY ATTORNEY AND DISCLOSURE OF EXPARTE COMMUNICATIONS

Attorney Holt stated there were no quasi-judicial matters before the Council for consideration.

VI. READING OF ALL ORDINANCES/RESOLUTIONS INTO THE RECORD

Ms. Novack stated there were no ordinances or resolutions before the Council for consideration.

VII. CONSENT AGENDA

Mayor Price asked if anyone wished to pull an item from the Consent Agenda for discussion. There were no requests.

MOTION

Sandy Gamble moved to approve the Consent Agenda [Tab 3. Approval of the July 2, 2025, City Council Meeting Minutes], seconded by Troy Singer. The motion carried unanimously 4-0.

Tab 3. Approval of the July 2, 2025, City Council Meeting Minutes

Approved on the Consent Agenda.

VIII. RESOLUTIONS

IX. ORDINANCES – PUBLIC HEARING

First Reading

Second Reading

X. GENERAL GOVERNMENT

Tab 4. Award of Bid, South Joanna St. Parking and Pedestrian Way

Mr. Tweedie made the following presentation:

> *Previously, the Council approved a project and allocated funding in the amount of $990,040 in the current fiscal year budget for the construction of additional paved parking, stormwater drainage improvements and a pedestrian walkway for the downtown waterfront area, at South Joanna Avenue, on the North side of the railroad tracks. In accordance with City purchasing policy, Invitation to Bid (ITB) solicitation 2025-0005 was published and advertised through the City purchasing department and the following bids were received on the closing date of June 20, 2025:*

Bulldog Sitework LLC	*$835,431.96*
Dale Beasely Construction	*$1,315,279.59*
Cathcart Construction	*$2,604,582.00*
RUSH Marine	*$3,640,469.88*

> *The project engineer, Don Griffey, Griffey Engineering, has reviewed the bids and recommended award of the bid to the qualified low bidder, Bulldog Sitework LLC in the amount of $835,431.96. This contract bid price is $154,608.04 below the allocated project budget of $990,040.00 allowing for a sufficient contingency of 15%.*

Mr. Tweedie stated that staff recommended Option 1: awarding the bid to the qualified low bidder, Bulldog Sitework LLC, in the amount of $835,431.96 and authorizing the City Administrator to execute the construction contract documents.

Council Member Singer emphasized the importance of the project and expressed appreciation that the City was taking proactive steps to address parking needs before they became problematic. He asked about the funding source for the project. Mr. Tweedie responded that the funds had been allocated through the General Fund Capital Improvements budget for Streets.

Council Member Singer then inquired about the disposition of any unused contingency funds. Ms. Houghton explained that any remaining funds would be returned to the General Fund Reserves.

Council Member Singer addressed a question to the representative from Bulldog Sitework LLC, who was present in the audience, asking how the company intended to complete the work at such a significantly lower cost than other bidders. Mr. Tweedie noted that Bulldog Sitework LLC was a small, local company already operating in the area.

Jeb Dotson, Project Manager for Bulldog Sitework LLC, responded that the company maintained strict cost control and operated without overhead. He shared that they had recently completed a taxiway expansion project for the City of Leesburg, securing the low bid and still delivering the project profitably.

Council Member Singer asked about the expected project timeline. Mr. Dotson stated that work would begin immediately upon project approval. He added that the only potential delay could arise if brick materials were selected, as sourcing brick could take additional time.

Council Member Grenier expressed full confidence in Bulldog Sitework LLC and said he looked forward to seeing the project move ahead.

Council Member Gamble asked whether the proposal before the Council reflected the full scope of the project or just a single phase. Mr. Tweedie confirmed that the bid and award covered the entire project.

Mayor Price voiced his support for the project, particularly noting that it was coming in under budget.

MOTION

Troy Singer moved to award the bid to Bulldog Sitework LLC, seconded by Bob Grenier. The motion carried unanimously 4-0.

XI. BUDGET WORKSHOP AND SETTING OF TENTATIVE MAXIMUM MILLAGE RATE

Tab 5. Budget Workshop – General Fund Presentation

Mr. Drury made the following presentation:

The City of Tavares operates and oversees several enterprises, including:

1. ***General Government:*** *Police, Fire, Emergency Management, Recreational Parks, Multiple Nature Parks, A County Regional Park Complex located off Woodlea Road (West Campus) and off David Walker Road (East Campus), City-Wide Beautification America-In-Bloom Program, Public Library, Street Paving & Sidewalk Program, Street Lighting, Traffic Intersection Signalizations, Golf Cart street friendly*

Program, Street Addressing and City Gateway & Directional Signage Program, Street Corridor Landscaping Program, City Vehicle Fleet Maintenance Program, Public Works, City Administration, City Finance, City Budgeting Department, Procurement Department, Information Technology Department, Building Permitting, Building Inspections, Code Enforcement, City Planning Services, Public Records Retention, Public Meeting Minutes Notation and Recording, Human Resources Department, Employee benefits and Recruitment Program, Public Communications, City Council Meetings, City Meeting Live Streaming Productions, Website and Social Media Program, Historical Museum, Economic Development, City Marina, Seaplane Base, Grant Programs, Public Infrastructure Insurance and Risk Management, Workers Compensation, Auto and General Property Liability Program, Pavilion on The Lake Special Events and Wedding Facility, Two Community Civic Centers, Senior Service Programming, adult and Youth Recreation Programs, Splash Park, Playgrounds and exercise stations, Volleyball courts, boat ramps, Community Parades, Fireworks and Special Events, Planning and Zoning and Wooton Wonderland.

2. ***Utilities:*** *Sewer Plant, Water Plant, Reclaimed Water Plant, water distribution system, sewer collection system, a reclaimed water distribution system and a utility bill collections department, and a fully certified wastewater, water and public health Laboratory.*
3. ***Stormwater:*** *A stormwater retention, detention, collection, maintenance system, right of way mowing and tree trimming maintenance department. Street Sweeping program.*
4. ***Garbage and recycling collection system:*** *There is a residential garbage collection program, a recycling program, and a commercial garbage collection program.*
5. ***Capital Program:*** *A five (5) year capital program utilizing grants and other sources of funds to replace and build public infrastructure.*

At this first budget workshop, the Finance Department will present the General Fund Proposed Budget (#1 above), and at the following budget workshops, the remaining funds (enterprises #2-#5) will be presented.

The City Council previously developed broad budget priorities for the City Administrator to use as guiding principles in developing next year's FY 26 proposed budget (see attached).

The City Administrator, Finance Director, and Budget Department have collaborated with each Department Director to develop departmental budgets that are included in this General Fund budget. Some proposed items were cut to create a balanced budget and are shown in the attached comprehensive "FY 2026 Cut List." Many of the Council's goals have been achieved. As in previous years, the cut list is organized into several categories.

1. *“**Reduction”** means the item is still in the proposed FY 2026 budget and the City Administrator has reduced the amount that the Department Director requested.*
2. ***“Cut**” means the City Administrator has removed the entire item from the budget.*
3. ***“Similar”** means the item was provided for in the prior year.*
4. ***“Enhanced**” means the item is a higher level of service than provided in the prior year.*
5. ***“Personal Services”** means a new position*
6. ***“Operating Expenses”** means general operating and maintenance expenses.*
7. ***“Capital Equipment”** means operating and maintenance equipment with a value over $5,000 and a lifespan of more than three years.*
8. *“**Capital Projects”:** These are over $5,000 in value and generally require designing, engineering, bidding, construction, or fabrication, and project oversight during the procurement, construction, and installation.*
9. ***“Debt Service”** The annual repayment cost toward a loan for a capital item.*

It is recommended that the City Council review the Cut List carefully. Although the items on the list were initially identified by the City’s professional Department Directors as necessary for efficiency and productivity, the City Administrator ultimately removed them to maintain a balanced budget and align with the Council’s goals. The cut list includes some items that were part of the City Council’s goals but were cut to maintain a balanced budget.

Proposed Budget Highlights:

1. *A Similar Level of Service is achieved and presented as directed by the Council. (Note: New and enhanced levels of service were not included – **See Exhibit B cut “Enhanced” items**)*
2. *The FY 26 budget is increased by 4.11% over the current year’s FY 25 Adopted Budget to maintain a similar level of service while keeping up with*
   increases in cost including health insurance (estimated at 4.5% increase), property insurance (estimated at 18% increase), and workers compensation (estimated at 7% increase) and inflation.
3. *The General Fund millage property tax rate has decreased from 6.7756 to 6.6850.*
4. *The Debt Service millage property tax rate decreased from .1601 to .1467.*
5. *The Government Finance Officers Association (GFOA) recommendation for General Fund reserves has been exceeded, totaling $7,646,355 in General Fund Reserves.*
6. *The Fire Assessment is level funded (no rate increase).*
7. *Employee raises are established at 5.0%.*

8. *Health insurance is budgeted for with a 4.5% increase. The employee and the employer share the cost of the increase.*
9. *Six new Public Safety positions are proposed: three for Police, and three for Fire.*
10. *Six new General Fund positions are proposed with a hire date of 7/1/2026: two for Finance (one part-time, and one full-time), one for Fleet Management, one for Facilities Management, and three for Community Services (two part-time, and one full-time).*
11. *Citywide Street paving is proposed at $400,000.*

Proposed property tax millage rate with a balanced budget

This proposed budget is balanced and reflects a property tax millage rate decrease, lowered from 6.7756 mills to 6.6850 mills (a 1.3% reduction), along with a proposed decrease in the debt service rate from .1601 mills to .1467 mills (an 8.4% reduction). At these lower millage rates, homeowners with a house valued at $200,000 and a standard homestead exemption would pay $1,025 annually, or $85.40 per month, in City Ad Valorem Property Taxes for the budget presented to the Council for FY 2026.

This first budget workshop, on July 16, 2025, will deliver, present, and discuss the General Fund budget. The second budget workshop, on August 6th, 2025, will deliver, present, and discuss the enterprise funds (Water, Wastewater, Reclamation, Stormwater, Solid Waste, Seaplane Base/Marina, Pavilion on the Lake) and the General Fund Budget. A high-level overview of Special Revenue Fund budgets will also be presented.

The maximum tentative millage rate will be set at the first budget workshop on July 16, 2025, after the budget presentation is delivered. A third Council budget workshop is scheduled for August 20, 2025, to discuss all budgets and the Five (5) Year Capital Improvement Plan, followed by two Public Hearings on the budget on September 3, 2025, and September 17, 2025.

Current estimates for State Shared revenues, general liability insurance, workers' compensation insurance, and grants will change over the next few weeks. As new estimates become available and grants are awarded, staff will update the budget and provide the city council with a list of revised estimates and their impact on the proposed budget.

It is recommended that the Finance Director present details of the General Fund budget to the Council, department by department.

It is recommended the Finance Director present the General Fund budget (expenses and revenues) department by department during which and/or after which the Council can ask pertinent questions or make pertinent comments related to the budget or the current budget cuts or reductions.

Ms. Houghton presented a PowerPoint presentation outlining the General Fund Budget.

Council Member Singer thanked staff for their efforts in securing grants, noting that the grant funding the City had received was equivalent to 1.2 mills, which represented a meaningful savings for residents.

Council Member Gamble asked who was responsible for writing the City's grants. Mr. Drury responded that department directors and their managers were responsible for writing grants specific to their respective departments.

Council Member Singer commented on the overall slowdown in growth in recent years. Mr. Drury confirmed this trend, reporting that property values had decreased by 8%, and that construction activity in the area had declined by approximately 33–34%.

Council Member Gamble inquired about the cost of conducting elections during even-numbered years when county, state, and federal elections were also held. Mr. Drury replied that the cost was minimal. Council Member Gamble noted that although voters had previously rejected four-year Council terms on two occasions, they might be more receptive to the idea if they understood the potential for cost savings.

Council Member Singer added that in the past, standalone municipal elections had cost around $10,000, but that figure had since risen to $43,000. He agreed that it might be worth revisiting the issue with a new referendum. Mr. Drury offered to provide additional information to the Council on that topic.

Council Member Grenier shared that the Tavares Library had recently received both a $10,000 grant and a $10,000 private donation.

Council Member Singer referred to slide 10 on page 5 of the presentation, which addressed reserve standards. He asked for clarification on the Government Finance Officers Association (GFOA) reserve recommendation. Ms. Houghton explained that the GFOA recommended maintaining reserves equal to two months of operating expenditures. Council Member Singer asked that staff provide a comparison of the City's current reserves versus those of several years ago. He emphasized the importance of maintaining healthy reserves without holding excess funds unnecessarily. Ms. Houghton acknowledged the Council's prudent reserve fund management and stated that the City was in an ideal position in terms of reserves.

Council Member Grenier expressed confidence in the City Administrator, stating he trusted Mr. Drury would never allow the City's reserves to fall into a financially risky position. Ms. Houghton added that Mr. Drury consistently requested that she closely monitor and verify the numbers.

Mr. Drury thanked Council Member Grenier for his comments.

Council Member Gamble pointed out that 10% of the Reserve Fund had been earmarked for contingencies rather than emergencies. He suggested moving those funds into a separate general expense contingency account. Mr. Drury agreed with the recommendation and proposed that staff begin identifying such funds in the fiscal impact sections of agenda reports to promote transparency.

Council Member Singer voiced support for the proposal, stating that clearly identifying the use of contingency funds would benefit both the Council and the public.

<u>Tab 6. Budget Workshop – Setting of Maximum Tentative Millage Rate</u>

Mr. Drury made the following presentation:

> *The General Fund budget was presented earlier at this City Council meeting, and the maximum tentative millage rate will be set at this meeting. The Utility and Special Revenue Fund budgets will be presented at the next City Council meeting on August 6, 2025. The Five-Year Capital Plan will be delivered, presented, and discussed at the August 20, 2025, budget workshop.*
>
> *Two Public Hearings on the budget are scheduled for September 3, 2025, and September 17, 2025.*
>
> *Once the City Council sets the Maximum Tentative Millage Rate, it may be decreased as the budget process continues; however, **it may not be increased**.*
>
> - *The proposed General Fund millage rate of 6.6850 mills represents a decrease from the prior year of 0.09 mills (6.7756 - 6.6850), a 1.34% decrease over the prior year, and 5.21% above the estimated rollback rate of 6.3538 mills.*
> - *The proposed Voted Debt Service millage rate of .1467 mills represents a decrease from the prior year of .0134 mills (.1601 - .1467), a 8.37% decrease over the prior year.*
> - *The total decrease is .104 mills, a 1.5% decrease over the prior year adopted millage rates.*

Mr. Drury said staff recommended Option 1, for the Council to move to set the Maximum Tentative Millage Rate at 6.6850, and the Maximum Tentative Voted Debt Millage Rate at 0.1467 mills. He said the proposed millage rates fo the General Fund (6.6850) and the Voted Debt Service Fund (.1467) represent a decrease of 1.5% from the adopted rates in the prior year.

Mayor Price commented that the proposed millage rate of 6.6850 appeared to be a win-win, as it would result in a lower tax burden for residents. He stated his support for setting the millage rate at 6.6850.

Council Member Grenier expressed some hesitation about locking in the final rate at this stage. He emphasized the importance of going through the whole budget review process and noted that, since it was still only July, the budget warranted further evaluation. Given the uncertainties that could emerge in the coming months, he indicated he would be comfortable proceeding with the current rate of 6.7756 for the time being.

Council Member Singer stated that he was comfortable with the proposed millage and debt rates. He noted that the reduction would reflect positively on the Council's efforts to lower taxes for residents and voiced his support for adopting the proposed rate.

Council Member Gamble acknowledged Council Member Grenier's concerns and pointed out that the new employee positions included in the budget would not take effect until July 2026. He noted that, should any issues arise before that time, the City would have the opportunity to reevaluate the staffing decisions. He expressed his support for the staff recommendation.

MOTION

Sandy Gamble moved to approve and set the Tentative Maximum Millage Rate at 6.6850 mills, seconded by Troy Singer. The motion carried 3-1 as follows:

Walter Price:	**Yes**
Sandy Gamble:	**Yes**
Bob Grenier:	**No**
Troy Singer:	**Yes**

MOTION

Sandy Gamble moved to approve and set the Maximum Tentative Voted Debt Millage Rate at 0.1467 mills, seconded by Troy Singer.

Council Member Gamble commended Mr. Drury, Ms. Houghton, Mr. Jones, and the Department Directors for presenting a fantastic budget.

The motion carried unanimously 4-0.

XII. NEW BUSINESS

XIII. OLD BUSINESS

XIV. AUDIENCE TO BE HEARD

Gary Santoro, Royal Harbor, commended and thanked Ms. Houghton and her staff, under the leadership of Mr. Drury, for their efforts on the Budget.

XV. REPORTS

Tab 7. City Administrator Report

Mr. Drury echoed Mr. Santoro's earlier remarks and expressed appreciation to the Department Directors for their collaborative efforts in assembling their departmental budgets. He acknowledged that the teams had worked together while keeping the Council's goals in focus. Mr. Drury remarked that when everyone rowed in the same direction, the ship moved forward. He explained that, although not every request could be fulfilled, the Council's broad budget goals provided a strong framework, and mutual respect among all involved had contributed to the development of a solid final budget. He expressed pride in the Directors for their hard work and dedication.

Ms. Houghton also extended her thanks to the City departments, recognizing their assistance and teamwork throughout the budgeting process.

Mr. Drury concluded by commending Mr. Jones for his excellent work on the budget.

Tab 8. City Council Member Reports

Council Member Grenier thanked Ms. Houghton and her team, stating that the City of Tavares continued to demonstrate full transparency in its budgeting process. He also expressed appreciation to Mr. O'Keefe and Communications Manager Tyler Wollack for their recent presentation on hurricane preparedness at the Masonic Lodge. Additionally, he complimented the appearance of the Woodlea House, noting that it looked beautiful and refreshed with its new roof.

Council Member Singer agreed that the proposed budget was extremely transparent and praised staff for presenting a well-prepared and thoughtful document. He also commended the Tavares team for successfully executing the 4th of July celebration, despite challenging weather conditions.

Council Member Gamble added that the 4th of July fireworks display had gone off successfully and thanked the staff who worked through the rain to ensure the event took place. He also joined in commending Ms. Houghton and Mr. Jones for their work on the budget.

Mayor Price echoed the appreciation for Ms. Houghton and Mr. Jones, stating he understood the difficulty of making necessary budget cuts and thanked them for their diligence.

XVI. ADJOURNMENT

There was no further business, and Mayor Price adjourned the meeting at 5:23 p.m.

Respectfully,

Susie Novack, MMC, FCRM
City Clerk