TAVARES CITY COUNCIL
MEETING MINUTES
SEPTEMBER 17, 2025 – 4:00 PM
TAVARES CITY HALL COUNCIL CHAMBERS
201 EAST MAIN STREET, TAVARES

COUNCIL MEMBERS PRESENT

Walter Price, Mayor
Lori Pfister, Vice Mayor
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 Greg Watts, Liberty Church Tavares

Pastor Greg Watts, Liberty Church Tavares, 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 staff had no changes.

MOTION

Troy Singer moved to approve the Agenda, seconded by Sandy Gamble. The motion carried unanimously 5-0.

IV. PROCLAMATIONS/PRESENTATIONS

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

Attorney Holt stated that there was one quasi-judicial matter before the Council for consideration: the second reading of Ordinance 2025-09 [Tab 4], rezoning of the Palm Gardens property. Attorney Holt administered the oath to those intending to provide testimony.

Attorney Holt asked the Council if they had any ex parte communications. The following disclosures were made:

- Mayor Price said he spoke with Chuck Hiott, PE, Director of Land Development with Halff.
- Vice Mayor Pfister said she received phone calls, which she did not return.
- Council Member Grenier said he received a text from Mr. Hiott.
- Council Member Singer said he spoke with Mr. Hiott.
- Council Member Gamble said he may have received a phone call, which he did not return.

VI. READING OF ALL ORDINANCES/RESOLUTIONS INTO THE RECORD

Ms. Novack read the following ordinances at second reading by title only:

ORDINANCE 2025-08

AN ORDINANCE OF THE CITY OF TAVARES, FLORIDA AMENDING THE CITY OF TAVARES LAND DEVELOPMENT REGULATIONS CHAPTER 4 APPLICATION PROCEDURES AND PERMITTING, TABLE 4-B AND SECTION 4-22 PROCEDURE FOR CONSIDERATION OF A FINAL PLAT, AND CHAPTER 16 SUBDIVISION REGULATIONS, SECTION 16-31 FORMS AND REPLACING FORM 16-13 IN ITS

ENTIRETY; SUBJECT TO THE RULES, REGULATIONS AND OBLIGATIONS ORDAINED BY THE CITY OF TAVARES COUNCIL; PROVIDING SEVERABILITY AND CONFLICTS; AND PROVIDING FOR AN EFFECTIVE DATE.

ORDINANCE 2025-09

AN ORDINANCE OF THE CITY OF TAVARES, FLORIDA, REZONING APPROXIMATELY 20.83 ± ACRES OF PROPERTY LOCATED ON THE NORTH SIDE OF US HWY 441, APPROXIMATELY 1.5 MILES WEST OF THE INTERSECTION OF US HWY 441 AND LAKE SHORE BLVD. AND 1.5 MILES EAST OF THE INTERSECTION OF US HWY 441 AND RADIO RD.; REZONING FROM PLANNED DEVELOPMENT (PD) TO MIXED USE (MU) DISTRICT; SUBJECT TO THE RULES, REGULATIONS AND OBLIGATIONS ORDAINED BY THE CITY OF TAVARES COUNCIL; PROVIDING FOR AN EFFECTIVE DATE.

Ms. Novack noted Resolutions 2025-15 [Final Millage Resolution] and 2025-16 [Final Budget Resolution] would be read in their entirety during the Budget Hearing at 5:05 p.m.

VII. CONSENT AGENDA

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

MOTION

Troy Singer moved to approve the Consent Agenda [Tab 2. Approval of the September 3, 2025, City Council Meeting Minutes], seconded by Bob Grenier. The motion carried unanimously 5-0.

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

Approved on the Consent Agenda.

VIII. RESOLUTIONS

IX. ORDINANCES – PUBLIC HEARING

First Reading

Second Reading

Tab 3. Ordinance 2025-08 – Amendments to the City's Land Development Regulations, Chapter 4 – "Application Procedures and Permitting," Table 4-B and Sections 4-22 – Procedure for Consideration of a Final Plat, and Chapter 16 –

<u>"Subdivision Regulations," Section 16-31 – Forms; and replacement of Form 16-13</u>

Mr. Drury introduced the item and provided a high-level overview. He said that under the existing practice City staff, the Planning and Zoning Board, and the City Council all approved both preliminary and final plats. He noted that a new state law prohibited Planning and Zoning Boards and City Councils from approving final plats and limited that authority to City staff.

Mr. Drury stated that the purpose of the agenda item was to update the City ordinance so that it complied with the new state law and required final plat approvals to be handled administratively by staff rather than through the City Council. He discussed his understanding of the reasoning for the legislative change and explained that the final plat process served only to confirm that infrastructure such as water lines, sewer lines, stormwater systems, streets, and the number of lots were consistent with what the City Council had already approved in the preliminary plat. He emphasized that there was no need for the City Council to approve the same matter twice once the construction had been completed.

Mr. Drury further explained that the final plat review was a ministerial and administrative task performed by the City Engineer, whose role was to calculate and verify technical compliance. He stressed that this process was not a policy decision but rather an administrative confirmation that the constructed improvements matched the approved preliminary plat.

Mr. Fabre made the following presentation:

> *On July 1, 2025, the State of Florida has amended s. 177.071, F.S. (see attached 2025-164 Laws of Florida); requiring that certain plat or replat submittals be administratively approved with no further action by City Council authority. The subject Ordinance proposes amendments to the City's Land Development Regulations to revise and streamline the approval process for plat and replat submittals. Specifically, the ordinance:*
>
> *• Amends Table 4-B and Section 4-22 within Chapter 4 to reflect changes to the final plat approval process;*
> *• Amends Chapter 16, Section 16-31 regarding forms associated with subdivision regulations;*
> *• Repeals and replaces Form 16-13 in its entirety;*
>
> *These amendments will allow for administrative approval of plats and replats, where appropriate, in a manner consistent with applicable Florida law.*
>
> *On August 14, 2025, the Planning & Zoning Advisory Board met and voted unanimously (6-0) to recommend approval, subject to a minor clarification. The*

City Council packet contains the revised edit as recommended by the P&Z Advisory Board and reviewed by staff and legal counsel.

Therefore, City Staff recommends that the City Council moves to approve Ordinance 2025-08.

Mayor Price asked for comments from the Council. There were none.

MOTION

Lori Pfister moved to approve Ordinance 2025-08, seconded by Bob Grenier.

Vice Mayor Pfister noted the ordinance was a housekeeping measure.

Council Member Gamble asked for clarification regarding the wording in the ordinance and the state law that referred to “certain plat submittals.” He questioned whether that language applied to anything after the original plat.

Mr. Drury and Attorney Holt clarified that the reference to “certain plat” in the state law meant the final plat.

The motion carried unanimously 5-0.

Tab 4. Ordinance 2025-09 – Palm Gardens Property – Rezoning of Approximately 20.83 Acres Located on the Northwest Intersection of US Hwy 441 and Dead River from City of Tavares Planned Development (PD) Zoning to Mixed Use (MU) Zoning District

Mr. Drury provided a high-level introduction of the request. He said that the Planning and Zoning Board and the City Council had previously approved the City-wide Comprehensive Plan, which called for mixed-use zoning on the Palm Gardens property. He noted that both the Planning and Zoning Board and the City Council had also approved the annexation of the property into the City with a Planned Development designation, again with mixed-use zoning.

Mr. Drury stated that the City Council had approved mixed-use zoning for this site on two previous occasions. The current request represented a third attempt at approval because the owner’s prior project had stalled, and the Planned Development and zoning had been extinguished. He reported that the Planning and Zoning Board had denied the owner’s recent request. Based on his observation at the Planning and Zoning Board meeting, it appeared that some members wanted to see a rendering of what the project could look like before recommending approval.

Mr. Drury concluded by stating that the request before the City Council was to designate the Palm Gardens property with mixed-use zoning, allowing the owner to place the property on the market and move forward with redevelopment.

Mr. Fabre made the following presentation:

The applicant is requesting a rezoning of the subject property from the expired Planned Development (PD Ordinance 2007-24) to the Mixed Use (MU) zoning district. The proposed MU zoning is intended to bring the site into consistency with the City's adopted Future Land Use Map designation of Mixed Use (MU) as outlined in the 2040 "Taking Flight" Comprehensive Plan.

The subject property is located at the northwest intersection of U.S. Highway 441 and Dead River, commonly known as Palm Gardens (AKA: Florida Lakefront RV Park). The parcel is approximately 20.83 acres in size. The property is bounded by the Dead River and associated wetlands to the east, U.S. Hwy 441 to the south, jurisdictional wetlands to the north, and a commercial land use (shed sales and storage facility) to the west. Demolition of the former manufactured home park on the site was completed in early 2024. The property is currently vacant, though some structures remain on-site, including a former restaurant, associated structures and boat dock.

A traffic study analysis was conducted by the applicant and accepted by the City's traffic consultant. Environmental and wetlands assessments were conducted for the site and provided to the city. Accordingly, any future development on the site will be required to comply with all applicable provisions of the City's Land Development Regulations.

At this time, the applicant does not have a specific proposed use or any development plans for the subject property. Therefore, the applicant elects to defer concurrency determination until such time as a final development order. Staff finds the rezoning request to be consistent with the City's Comprehensive Plan and Land Development Regulations.

On August 14, 2025, the Planning & Zoning Advisory Board met and a motion for approval failed (4-2). The majority of board members indicated that approval of the rezoning request should have a development plan for the subject property (see attached draft P&Z minutes).

After the subsequent P&Z meeting, below are relevant adopted codes for City Council to consider:

- *"It is the intention of the Council that these regulations implement the planning policies adopted by the Council for the City and its planning area, as reflected in the Comprehensive Plan and other planning documents. In accordance with Chapter 163 of the Florida Statutes, all permits issued under this Chapter shall be consistent with the adopted Comprehensive Plan" (Land Development Regulations, Chapter 1, Section 1-6). - The proposed "Mixed Use" (MU) rezoning request is consistent with the adopted Comprehensive Plan.*

- *"After [PD expiration] revocation, City Council may take action to rezone the subject property to the lowest intensity and density zoning designation consistent with the Comprehensive Plan" (Land Development Regulations, Chapter 8, Section 8-11, 10, 2, f, 4). - The proposed "Mixed Use" (MU) rezoning request is the lowest intensity and density zoning designation consistent with the Comprehensive Plan.*
- *"Intensity and Density of Development. No gross residential density or gross non-residential floor area ratio shall exceed the maximum density or intensity designated in the future land use element of the Comprehensive Plan, regardless of the density/intensity permitted by the applicable zoning district" (Land Development Regulations, Chapter 8, Section 8-5, B). - The proposed "Mixed Use" (MU) rezoning shall be consistent with the adopted Land Development Standards for the MU zoning district.*
- *"Future Land Use/Zoning Matrix. The zoning districts in this chapter are consistent with the Future Land Use classifications of the Comprehensive Plan and shall be applied as shown in Table 8-1, Future Land Use/Zoning Matrix (Land Development Regulations, Chapter 8, Section 8-5, C). - The proposed "Mixed Use" (MU) rezoning is consistent with this Code provision.*
- *Any Preliminary Subdivision Plan/Plat (PSP) of the subject property will require City Council Approval.*
- *Any Variance request from the adopted Code will require a Planning & Zoning and City Council Public Hearings.*
- *The proposed rezoning submittal is complete per Table 4-A "Submittal Requirements" of the Land Development Regulations.*

Therefore, City Staff recommends that the City Council moves to approve Ordinance 2025-09.

Mayor Price asked how environmental impacts, traffic, and school concurrency requirements were being addressed without a concept plan. Mr. Fabre responded that these items had been evaluated at the preliminary stage based on the property's highest and best use. He stated that the traffic consultant had analyzed both residential and commercial scenarios and confirmed the findings. Mayor Price asked whether mixed-use required both residential and commercial components. Mr. Fabre stated that a commercial and a residential component should be included.

Mayor Price inquired whether there was any intention to develop the property under the Live Local Act. Mr. Drury said the applicant could address those questions.

Council Member Gamble asked whether the matter would return to the Planning and Zoning Board. Mr. Fabre stated that it would not.

Vice Mayor Pfister asked whether the project could be developed as entirely residential or entirely commercial. Mr. Drury and Attorney Holt explained that it could not be exclusively one or the other and that some commercial component would be required.

Vice Mayor Pfister expressed concern that the project could result in mostly residential uses with very little commercial development. Mr. Fabre clarified that the Council would have discretion at the preliminary plat stage if the balance of uses did not meet expectations. Mr. Drury added that a Planned Development (PD) would require Council approval, but if the property developed under straight zoning and complied with code, it would not return to the Council. Vice Mayor Pfister stated that the City needed more commercial uses and not additional housing.

Attorney Holt stated the Live Local Act could be applied in industrial, commercial, and mixed use districts, but not in residential districts. Mr. Drury noted that this meant rezoning the property to commercial or mixed use would open the possibility of Live Local Act applications. He stated the City's authority was limited and the decision was largely dictated by higher levels of government.

Council Member Gamble asked about traffic impacts near the bridge on U.S. 441, noting the history of accidents in that area. Mr. Fabre stated that staff shared those concerns and that such issues would be reviewed in greater detail when a development plan was submitted.

Chuck Hoitt of Halff Engineering, 902 North Sinclair Avenue, addressed the Council to clarify that the property would only return to the Council if variances or land divisions were requested. If developed under a straight site plan with no subdivisions, the matter would not return to the Council.

<u>The applicant, Trey Vick, 3349 Holiday Avenue</u>, was sworn in by Attorney Holt. Mr. Vick stated that he had no intention of utilizing the Live Local Act. He explained that his purpose in seeking mixed-use zoning was to establish a rulebook so the property could move forward with a comprehensive development plan. He noted that the property currently lacked entitlements, which prevented investment in engineering and architectural plans. He expressed the intention to comply with City codes and to return for variances if needed.

Mr. Vick stated that the owner's general vision included a combination of multi-family residential and commercial uses, with restaurants or service businesses along U.S. 441 and residential development behind. He said it was premature to present architectural renderings, as doing so without a defined plan might appear misleading.

Council Member Grenier stated that visuals or concept renderings could have been helpful to the Planning and Zoning Board and the Council. He emphasized the importance of protecting conservation areas along the Dead River. Mr. Vick responded that he preferred to be candid about the uncertainty at this stage rather than provide speculative renderings.

<u>MOTION</u>

Lori Pfister moved to approve Ordinance 2025-09, seconded by Troy Singer.

Council Member Gamble asked about property lines shown on the map and whether portions across the Dead River were included. Mr. Vick stated that the Dead River was a navigable waterway and was not part of the developable property. Attorney Holt confirmed that setbacks from waterways and wetlands, as well as regulatory requirements of the St. Johns River Water Management District, would apply.

Council Member Singer expressed confidence in the Planning and Zoning Board, noting that its concerns stemmed from the absence of a concept plan. He asked Attorney Holt whether the applicant's statements about intent would be binding. Attorney Holt stated they would not be binding.

Vice Mayor Pfister expressed concern about the possibility of uncontrolled development and asked whether the applicant intended to move forward promptly. Mr. Vick confirmed that he and his partners intended to develop the property. He stated that their goal was to move forward with a quality project that would become an asset to the City.

Mayor Price asked about the property's marketability without zoning. Mr. Vick stated that without zoning, the property was unmarketable, which could result in further delays and uncertainty.

Vice Mayor Pfister and Council Member Grenier both expressed confidence in the applicant's intentions and encouraged him to deliver a quality project for such a visible and scenic location.

Council Member Singer noted that whatever decision was made could be subject to legal challenge. Attorney Holt stated that if the rezoning were denied, the property would remain without zoning, since there was no reverter language in place to return it to a prior classification.

The motion carried unanimously 5-0.

X. <u>GENERAL GOVERNMENT</u>

<u>Tab 5. Collective Bargaining Agreement Between Tavares Professional Firefighters Local 3245 and the City of Tavares</u>

Mr. Drury made the following presentation:

> *The City's Collective Bargaining Management Team (Mayor, City Administrator, Fire Chief, Finance Director & Human Resource Director) have bargained in good faith with the Firefighters Collective Bargaining Representatives on several occasions over the previous several months and have reached an agreement for Council's consideration which calls for the following salient items:*
>
> *1) In order to raise the Firefighter's pay to market conditions, there exists a need to raise pay by 12%. In order to afford this, it was agreed that it would need to be*

spread over a period of time as follows: There would be a retroactive increase of 3.5% on July 1, 2025, a 5% increase on October 1, 2025, and a 3.5% increase on July 1, 2026.
2) In order to raise Medic Pay to market conditions, Medic pay would be increased from $3.75 per hour to $4.13 per hour effective October 1st, 2025.
3) In order to improve the safety and the resting period of firefighters, Tavares would implement "True Kelley Days" in January 2026, from one every 28 days to one every 21 days, which means going from 13 to 17 Kelly days per year (4 additional rest days) per firefighter.
4) In order to improve safety, a new "Ladder Truck" assignment incentive pay of $750 per year upon a firefighter's completion of the 4 classes needed to obtain Ladder Truck Operational certification:

a. *Vehicle Mechanical Rescue (VMR)*
b. *Rope Rescue Operations*
c. *Truck Company Operations*
d. *Aerial Operations*

The City's Collective Bargaining Management Team recommends approval of the attached agreement, which reflects the above items, and the Firefighters have voted on and approved the agreement.

Mr. Drury said staff recommended Option 1, to approve the agreement. He reviewed the fiscal impact, noting the current year's retroactive increase of $18,821 had been absorbed through delayed hiring. He stated the remaining costs included $79,048 in FY26 for the 5% increase, $20,454 in July FY27 for the final 3.5% increase, $11,820 for medic pay, and $3,000 for the ladder truck incentive, totaling $133,143. He emphasized that these amounts were not included in the FY26 draft budget because negotiations had only recently concluded.

Mr. Drury provided four funding options for Council consideration:

- *Approve the agreement with funding from the General Fund surplus;*
- *Approve the agreement with funding from the General Fund reserves;*
- *Approve the agreement with funding from the General Fund and designate the source during the upcoming budget discussion; or*
- *Not approve the agreement.*

Mayor Price asked for comments from the Council.

Council Member Singer expressed support for the firefighters and all City staff, stating the City would not be what it was without them. He stated the firefighters deserved the increase and expressed concern that the timing of the negotiations left the Council unaware of the fiscal impact during budget deliberations. He noted that had the agreement been available earlier, the Council would not have had $108,970 in additional funds, and would have faced a $24,000 deficit instead. He recommended applying the contingency funds toward the agreement, with the remaining $24,000 funded from reserves.

Vice Mayor Pfister thanked the management team for their efforts in negotiating the contract. She stated that the city's reserves were strong and supported using them to fund the agreement.

MOTION

Lori Pfister moved to approve the Collective Bargaining Agreement between the Tavares Firefighters Local 3245 and the City of Tavares, with funding from Reserves. Bob Grenier seconded the motion for discussion.

Council Member Grenier inquired about the level of reserves.

Ms. Houghton responded that reserves were projected at $7.283 million, and with the agreement funded from reserves, the balance would be approximately $7.169 million. She explained this equated to 2.88 months of reserves, which remained above the Government Finance Officers' Association (GFOA) recommended level of two to three months.

Mr. Drury added that reserves were approximately $2 million above GFOA recommendations.

Council Member Gamble noted that constituents often questioned the level of reserves and stated that using them for firefighter salaries would still keep the City within GFOA standards. He suggested approving the agreement with reserves and then separately bringing back any other contingency projects for Council approval.

Vice Mayor Pfister emphasized that reserves were taxpayer funds and that using them for the firefighters was a responsible investment in public safety and community quality of life. She stated the City had always been fiscally responsible with reserves.

Mayor Price stated that as a member of the management team, he had reviewed pay levels in surrounding jurisdictions. He said the agreement would make Tavares competitive with other agencies and prevent the loss of personnel. He believed the agreement was both reasonable and necessary.

The motion carried unanimously 5-0.

XI. BUDGET HEARING – FISCAL YEAR 2025-20026 MILLAGE & BUDGET – READING OF FINAL MILLAGE & BUDGET RESOLUTIONS – 5:05 P.M.

Tab 6. Approve Resolution 2025-15 for Final Millage Rate for FY 2026 – Second Reading

Ms. Novack read Resolution 2025-15 in its entirety as follows:

RESOLUTION 2025 - 15

A RESOLUTION ADOPTING A FINAL MILLAGE RATE OF 6.6850 FOR THE CITY OF TAVARES, FLORIDA, FOR AD VALOREM TAXES FOR FISCAL YEAR 2025-2026; SETTING FORTH THE PERCENT BY WHICH THE MILLAGE RATE IS GREATER THAN THE "ROLLED-BACK" RATE.

BE IT RESOLVED BY THE CITY COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF TAVARES, FLORIDA:

WHEREAS, the City of Tavares of Lake County, Florida on September 3, 2025, adopted the 2025-2026 Fiscal Year Tentative Millage Rate following a public hearing as required by Florida Statute 200.065.

WHEREAS, the City of Tavares of Lake County, Florida, following due public notice as required by law, held a second public hearing on September 17, 2025, as required by Florida Statute 200.065 on the 2024-2025 Millage Rate; and

WHEREAS, the gross taxable value for operating purposes not exempt from taxation within Lake County has been certified by the County Property Appraiser to the City of Tavares as $1,896,245,451.

NOW THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED by the City of Tavares of Lake County, Florida, that:

1. **The City of Tavares Fiscal Year 2025-2026 operating millage rate to be levied is hereby set at 6.6850 mills, which millage rate is greater than the rolled back rate of 6.3538 mills by 5.21%.**

2. **The voted debt service millage rate is set at .1467 mills for Fiscal Year 2025-2026.**

3. **This Resolution will take effect immediately upon its adoption.**

Mr. Drury noted the advertisement for the Millage and Budget Hearings were advertised on September 14, 2025, and provided the following presentation:

The City Administrator and staff have developed a budget for Fiscal Year 2026 for Council's consideration totaling $69,201,385 that is fully balanced. The proposed budget for FY 2026 includes, among many other items, the following:

1. *A Similar Level of Service is achieved.*

2. *General Fund millage rate decreases from 6.7756 mills to 6.6850 mills, which is 5.21% above the rollbacked rate.*
3. *Debt Service millage rate decreases from .1601 to .1467.*
4. *Estimated reserve balances that meet GFOA recommendations.*
5. *Fire Assessment level funded with no rate increase.*
6. *Employee raises of 5.0%.*
7. *Six new Public Safety positions are proposed: three for Police, and three for Fire.*
8. *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).*
9. *Street paving - $400,000.*
10. *Expanded programs are cut.*

Previously, the City Council discussed the proposed Fiscal Year 2026 Budget at the following public meetings:

- *7/16/2025 – City Council Budget Workshop – (General Fund Budget)*
- *7/16/2025 – City Council Budget Workshop – (Set Maximum Tentative Millage rate)*
- *8/06/2025 – City Council Budget Workshop – (General, Utility, and Special Revenue Fund Budgets)*
- *8/20/2025 – City Council Budget Workshop – (Capital Improvement Plan Presentation)*
- *8/20/2025 – City Council Budget Workshop – (Discussion on FY 2026 Proposed Budget)*
- *9/03/2025 – City Council Budget Public Hearing – (Discussion on FY 2026 Proposed Budget)*

A Tentative Budget (all funds) has been prepared for the City Council. Exhibit A lists all the changes made to the Proposed Budget since it was presented at the July 16th City Council meeting. The changes made have resulted in $108,970 in unappropriated revenue in the General Fund that remains available for appropriation. Options include: 1) Appropriate it as a "contingency" for unforeseen initiatives or projects that the Council may want to initiate during the next fiscal year 2) Fund a cut item 3) Place it into reserves or 4) lower the millage rate.

Mr. Drury said the staff recommended Option 1, for the Council to take public input and approve the Final Millage Rate for Fiscal Year 2026 as reflected in Resolution 2025-15, and address the $108,970 appropriations during the next agenda item – adoption of the budget.

Mayor Price asked for comments from the audience. There was none.

Mayor Price asked for comments from the Council.

Council Member Singer asked Ms. Houghton if it was possible to lower the millage rate. Ms. Houghton stated the rate could be lowered at the meeting, and not increased.

Council Member Singer asked if reserves could be used to accomplish a reduction. Ms. Houghton confirmed that reserves could be applied, noting that the City held approximately $2,198,425 above the Government Finance Officers Association (GFOA) recommended reserve levels. Vice Mayor Pfister inquired if that figure was after the appropriation, and Mr. Drury confirmed it was.

Mr. Drury clarified that the question was whether appropriating the $2.1 million in excess reserves to reduce the millage rate would result in a measurable change. Ms. Houghton, cautioning that the calculation was being done without full analysis, estimated that the millage rate would decrease to 5.5256 mills and noted that it did not account for recurring expenditures that could be impacted.

Vice Mayor Pfister asked for the estimated difference to a homeowner with a $300,000 property. Ms. Houghton calculated an estimated annual savings of $289.85.

Council Member Singer asked whether the Council wished to lower the rate or maintain it as is. Vice Mayor Pfister remarked that while the idea was good, the savings were modest and equivalent to a family choosing to forgo a single outing each month. She expressed concern about the long-term consequences.

Mr. Drury cautioned against using one-time dollars to offset recurring expenses. He explained that while one-time revenues could be applied toward one-time projects such as a parking garage, using reserves to offset recurring costs would require replacing the $2.1 million the following year.

Council Member Gamble noted uncertainty regarding the future of property taxes, stating that reductions in homestead property tax revenue could be forthcoming, and the City should be cautious.

Council Member Singer emphasized that he only wished to show that money existed that could be applied, though he was satisfied with the recommended rate. Vice Mayor Pfister said she appreciated the idea but did not support lowering the rate for that year.

Mayor Price asked if unused funds could be carried forward into the following budget year. Mr. Drury confirmed. Council Member Gamble added that rollover amounts were already assigned, and Mayor Price clarified he was referring to the general reserve level. He agreed that with uncertainty in property tax revenues, the City should maintain its reserves to protect essential services.

MOTION

Troy Singer moved to adopt Resolution 2025-15 and recommended an operating millage rate of 6.6850 mills and a debt service millage rate of 0.1467 for Fiscal

Year 2025-2026. The motion was seconded by Lori Pfister. The motion carried unanimously 5-0 at 5:28 p.m.

Tab 7. Approve Resolution 2025-16 for Final Budget for FY 2026 – Second Reading

Ms. Novack read Resolution 2025-16 in its entirety as follows:

RESOLUTION 2025-16

A RESOLUTION ADOPTING THE FINAL BUDGET FOR THE CITY OF TAVARES, FLORIDA, FOR THE FISCAL YEAR 2025 - 2026.

BE IT RESOLVED BY THE CITY COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF TAVARES, FLORIDA:

WHEREAS, a public hearing on the tentative 2025-2026 budget was held at the Tavares City Hall Council Chambers in the City of Tavares, Florida, Lake County, Florida on Wednesday, September 3, 2025 at 5:05 p.m., as required by Florida Statutes 200.065; and

WHEREAS, the general public was given an opportunity to express its views pertaining to the tentative budget, and

WHEREAS, the City Council approved the tentative budget for 2025-2026, and

WHEREAS, a second public hearing on the proposed 2025-2026 budget was held in the Council Chambers at the Tavares City Hall, 201 East Main Street in the City of Tavares, Florida, on Wednesday, September 17, 2025, at 5:05 p.m.,

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the Budget for 2025-2026 fiscal year for the City of Tavares, Florida is hereby adopted by the Tavares City Council in the amount of $69,201,385 at public hearing this 17th day of September 2025.

This resolution will take effect immediately upon its adoption.

Mr. Drury noted the advertisement for the Millage and Budget Hearings were advertised on September 14, 2025, and provided the following presentation:

The City Administrator and staff have developed a budget for Fiscal Year 2026 for Council's consideration totaling $69,201,385 that is fully balanced. The proposed budget for FY 2026 includes, among many other items, the following:

1. *Similar Level of Service is achieved.*
2. *General Fund millage rate decreases from 6.7756 mills to 6.6850 mills, which is 5.21% above the rollbacked rate.*
3. *Debt Service millage rate decreases from .1601 to .1467.*
4. *Estimated reserve balances that meet GFOA recommendations.*
5. *Fire Assessment level funded with no rate increase.*

6. *Employee raises of 5.0%.*
7. *Six new Public Safety positions are proposed: three for Police, and three for Fire.*
8. *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).*
9. *Street paving - $400,000.*
10. *Expanded programs are cut.*

Previously, the City Council discussed the proposed Fiscal Year 2026 Budget at the following public meetings:

- *7/16/2025 – City Council Budget Workshop – (General Fund Budget)*
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- *8/06/2025 – City Council Budget Workshop – (General, Utility, and Special Revenue Fund Budgets)*
- *8/20/2025 – City Council Budget Workshop – (Capital Improvement Plan Presentation)*
- *8/20/2025 – City Council Budget Workshop – (Discussion on FY 2026 Proposed Budget)*
- *9/03/2025 – City Council Budget Public Hearing – (Discussion on FY 2026 Proposed Budget)*

A Tentative Budget (all funds) has been prepared for the City Council. Exhibit A lists all the changes made to the Proposed Budget since it was presented at the July 16th City Council meeting. The changes made have resulted in $108,970 in unappropriated revenue in the General Fund that remains available for appropriation. In addition, the firefighters' union contract resulted in $114,322, which needs to be added to the budget. Options include: 1) Appropriate the surplus to cover the firefighters' union contract, or 2) Fund a cut item(s) and fund the firefighters' union contract with reserves.

At the previous Public Hearing, prior to the firefighters' union contract being finalized, Council member Singer proposed that the surplus be allocated for items on the cut list, such as road paving or lighting at the U.S. 441 gateway sign. Council member Gamble suggested splitting the funds between roads and sidewalks. The Council agreed that the allocation of the surplus should be decided at the next Public Hearing. An opportunity is available to continue those discussions now.

Mr. Drury said staff recommended Option 1, for the Council to take public input, approve the Final Budget for Fiscal Year 2026 as reflected in Resolution 2025-16 and appropriate the $108,970 as the Council deemed appropriate, and fund the firefighters' union contract from reserves.

Mayor Price asked for comments from the audience. There was none.

Mayor Price asked for comments from the Council.

<u>**MOTION**</u>

Troy Singer moved to return the $108,970 surplus back into reserves. The motion was seconded by Lori Pfister.

Vice Mayor Pfister stated that instead of placing the funds into reserves, she would prefer to allocate the surplus toward specific projects, including Ruby Street West End lighting, gateway year-round lighting , and funding an economic development retail recruitment consultant. She explained that investing in a consultant would strengthen the City's commercial tax base and offset the reliance on residential growth.

Mr. Tweedie said the consultant would provide data analysis, market studies, and recruitment strategies aligned with the City's approved economic development strategy along U.S. 441 and State Road 19. He emphasized that such firms had established relationships with commercial developers and operators, giving the City access to higher-quality development opportunities.

Vice Mayor Pfister noted that approximately $49,126 would remain, which could be used for sidewalk repairs or to establish a gateway residential grant program to improve the City's entry corridors. She also suggested replacing the dead palm tree at the downtown roundabout before the installation of Christmas lights.

Council Member Gamble said he supported sidewalk investments in areas where children walk to school, while Vice Mayor Pfister suggested sidewalk repairs and a grant program to help residents improve properties along gateways. Mr. Drury stated that a new sidewalk would cost approximately $16,000 for one block on one side of the street, and the City could address additional needs through a broader program.

Council Member Singer asked how long the retail consultant had been on the budget cut list. Mr. Drury responded that it had been removed for eight consecutive years.

The motion failed 4-1 as follows:

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

Mr. Drury noted the City already had a commercial façade grant program in place. Vice Mayor Pfister suggested setting aside funds to create a similar residential gateway grant program, beginning with the St. Clair Abrams Avenue and Gateway Boulevard corridors.

She added that additional funding could later support Main Street and other entryways, noting that such investments would help the community and enhance the City's competitiveness in the America in Bloom program. Mr. Drury stated that staff would return with a complete program for Council consideration, potentially structured as a 50/50 matching grant with a maximum award of $500.

Mayor Price expressed support for funding a retail consultant. He shared that he had spoken with a consultant at the Florida League of Cities conference, who provided a retail report identifying unmet opportunities in the Tavares market area. Mayor Price emphasized the importance of spurring commercial development along U.S. 19 before it became dominated by residential apartments, and he noted that strengthening the commercial tax base would help offset anticipated losses from homestead exemptions. He expressed preference for prioritizing three to five projects, with any remaining balance returned to reserves.

Council Member Grenier stated that the entire $108,970 surplus should be spent on tangible projects, including the retail consultant, to help the City's Economic Development Department attract new businesses. He emphasized that investments in visible improvements such as year-round lighting at the gateway fountain would reinforce Tavares' unique identity as "America's Seaplane City." Council Member Grenier concluded that fiscal investment in the community was the right direction and that the surplus should be spent entirely on projects residents could see and benefit from, rather than held in reserves.

MOTION

Lori Pfister moved to approve the Final Budget as reflected in Resoluton 2025-16, with the $108,970 appropriate funds to be applied to the following projects:

- **West End Lighting at $3,474**
- **Gateway Lighting at $1,370**
- **Retail Consultant for Economic Development at $55,000**
- **Sidwalk – 1 Block/1 Side at $16,000**
- **Citizen Gateway Grants at $20,000**
- **Additional Sidewalks at $13,126**

The motion was seconded by Bob Grenier.

Mr. Drury advised that staff would return with a full Fiscal Year 2026 sidewalk repair, replacement, and new construction program for Council approval, with opportunities for Council to amend the program as needed.

The motion passed 4-1 as follows at 5:54 p.m.:

Walter Price: **Yes**
Lori Pfister: **Yes**

Sandy Gamble: Yes
Bob Grenier: Yes
Troy Singer: No

XII. NEW BUSINESS

XIII. OLD BUSINESS

XIV. AUDIENCE TO BE HEARD

Steven Lestner, 516 North Rockingham Avenue, Tavares, expressed concern about a proposed gas tax, growth, and infrastructure costs. He opposed new apartment construction, favored the redevelopment of existing buildings, and suggested requiring developers to contribute to infrastructure development. He voiced support for firefighter raises and appreciation for first responders.

Mayor Price clarified that the proposed gas tax was a County issue, not a City matter. Council Member Sandy Gamble noted the State's Live Local Act limited municipal control.

Phil Hartman, 1560 Apache Circle, Tavares, requested approval for six additional flagpoles at the Lake Francis Estates Veterans Memorial to honor all branches of the armed services.

Mayor Price responded that the request would require an ordinance change, as current regulations only allow one flagpole per parcel. Mr. Drury said staff could bring back an amendment to the Land Development Regulations allowing up to seven flagpoles for homeowners' associations with a common area, provided the HOA approved the project. He confirmed that a permit would still be required under existing rules, and that the City could not waive permit fees for selected projects, even for patriotic displays, as fees must be applied consistently to all residents.

Carsten Keifer, President of the Tavares Professional Firefighters Local 3245, thanked the Council and staff for their support and approval of the new collective bargaining agreement.

XV. REPORTS

Tab 8. City Administrator Report

Mr. Drury reported that he had been invited by Council Member Grenier to speak at the Central Florida History Museum Symposium, hosted at the Pavilion on the Lake. He explained that the symposium was held quarterly in different parts of Central Florida and that Council Member Grenier had secured Tavares as the host site with Council support and funding. Mr. Drury noted the event drew more than 100 attendees, and he stated that he was honored to give a brief presentation welcoming the group. He thanked Council Member Grenier for the invitation.

Mr. Tweedie stated that he had attended the symposium and congratulated Council Member Grenier. He added that most attendees had never visited the Pavilion on the Lake before, and he remarked that the event was excellent promotion for the facility and the community.

Chief Keith expressed appreciation to the union executive leadership team and to the Council for approval of the new collective bargaining agreement. He gave special thanks to Mayor Price for representing the Council during negotiations. Chief Keith also thanked the Council for attending the Patriots Day September 11 Remembrance Ceremony at the Historic Courthouse and said he was proud of the Council's participation and support.

Mr. Aldrich thanked Council Member Grenier, noting that the History Museum experienced a surge of visitors following the symposium. He announced the first community engagement meeting for the Golden Triangle Regional Park was scheduled for September 25 at the Golden Triangle YMCA. He added that a second meeting would follow on October 16 at the Civic Center and that residents could also provide input via the public survey at gtparks.com.

Ms. Houghton thanked the Council and stated that she looked forward to implementing the newly adopted budget.

Tab 9. City Council Member Reports

Vice Mayor Pfister noted she missed the September 11 Patriots Day Remembrance Ceremony and the symposium event due to scheduling conflicts. She also noted:

- Several representatives would be attending the upcoming America in Bloom Conference, and she expressed excitement about the opportunity.

Council Member Grenier reported on the Central Florida History Museum Sharing Symposium, which Tavares hosted at the Pavilion on the Lake. He also noted:

- Nine, possibly ten, counties were represented, with more than 100 people in attendance.
- Mayor Price led the Pledge of Allegiance and offered remarks, and Council Members Singer and Gamble, as well as Mr. Drury, participated.
- Staff led by Carrie Petroski, delivered a flawless presentation in colonial attire, and Tavares "shined" in front of historical societies across Central Florida.
- Several attendees expressed interest in moving to Tavares.
- Residents were encouraged to visit the StoryWalk at the library.
- Noted Chief Keith would be his guest on an upcoming radio program to discuss fire prevention.

Council Member Singer thanked Ms. Houghton, Budget Analyst Brett Jones, and the Finance Department staff for their dedication in preparing the budget. He also noted:

- Pride in Tavares and appreciation for all City staff.
- Said it was an honor to attend the September 11 ceremony, and he asked Chief Keith to commend Division Chief Mark Kidd for his work on the event.
- Said the symposium was educational, showcased Tavares well, and impressed other cities.

Council Member Gamble thanked Council Member Grenier for the opportunity to attend the symposium. He also noted:

- He learned historical details, including Elvis Presley filming locally and the origin of Lake Aster's name.
- Said Mr. Drury gave a strong presentation, and symposium materials were shared with other municipalities.
- Stated the importance of retaining police officers and firefighters, and that the Council's actions would help keep qualified personnel.
- Said he opposed using artificial intelligence to displace jobs, citing concerns about negative impacts on the economy.
- Commended the Finance Department for their responsiveness and detailed knowledge of the budget.

Mayor Price reported that he attended the Historical Society meeting and was proud to hear residents and visitors remark that "Tavares has it going on." He also noted:

- The September 11 memorial event was meaningful and well attended.
- Thanked the Finance Department for their extensive work on the 650-page budget document.
- Said Tavares is "the place to be."

XVI. <u>ADJOURNMENT</u>

There was no further business, and Mayor Price adjourned the meeting at 6:16 p.m.

Respectfully,

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Susie Novack, MMC, FCRM
City Clerk