Effingham County Georgia
Board of Commissioners

Damon M. Rahn, Chairman at Large
Forrest F. Floyd, District 1
Roger Burdette, District 2
Jamie Deloach, District 3
Elizabeth Helmly, District 4
Phil Kieffer, District 5

WORK SESSION MEETING MINUTES
JANUARY 20, 2026

The Board of Commissioners of Effingham County, Georgia, Mr. Damon Rahn, Mr. Forrest Floyd, Mr. Roger Burdette, Mr. Jamie Deloach, Ms. Beth Helmly and Mr. Phil Kieffer met in work session at 4:00 pm on Tuesday, January 20, 2026 in the Commissioners Meeting Chambers at the Effingham County Administrative Complex located at 804 South Laurel Street Springfield, Georgia 31329.

STAFF PARTICIPATION

Mr. Tim Callanan – County Administrator, Mr. Edward Newberry – County Attorney, Ms. Stephanie Johnson – County Clerk, Ms. Tasheena Shiggs – Deputy County Clerk, Ms. Marie Todd – Executive Assistant. Ms. Kimberly Barlett – Senior Planner, Ms. Pamela Melser – Development Services Director, Ms. Jennifer Rose – Planner I, and Ms. Maraya Durham – I.T. Support Specialist

CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

Mike Vaquer, Rita Elliot, and Ryan Thompson.

I - CALL TO ORDER

Chairman Rahn called the session to order at 4:02pm.

II- WORK SESSION TOPICS

DISCUSSION OF RESEARCH FINDINGS RELATED TO CEMETERY REGULATIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS (1):

Planner I Jennifer Rose presented research regarding the regulation of private cemeteries, prompted by a lack of clarity in previous sessions. Historically, the local R-1 zoning ordinance required a five-acre minimum for cemeteries and specific setbacks, but these clauses were removed during an October 2025 amendment. Current research into neighboring counties reveals a standard practice of maintaining building setbacks between 50 and 300 feet, with a 50 to 100-foot buffer from wells, septic systems, and water bodies to protect public health.

A primary concern addressed was the "discoverability" of burial sites. While Georgia state law only requires burial locations to be noted on death certificates, the Department of Community Affairs recommends that sites be professionally surveyed and recorded with the Clerk of Court. This ensures that the cemetery is included in the legal description of the property deed, providing transparency for future owners when land changes hands.

The Board also discussed the legalities of access. Under Georgia Code Title 44, property owners must allow descendants to visit gravesites up to twice a year with a 14-day notice.

To prevent future conflicts, the Board emphasized the necessity of a dedicated 60-foot easement and a minimum lot size, potentially five total acres with at least one acre dedicated to the burial site, to ensure the property remains usable and accessible without confrontation.

DISCUSSION OF AN AMENDMENT TO THE EFFINGHAM COUNTY CODE OF ORDINANCES, PART II, CHAPTER 36, ARTICLE IV - OPEN BURNING (2):

Planner I Rose continued the discussion with proposed amendments to the county's open burning ordinance, aimed at consolidating regulatory standards with guidance from the Georgia Forestry Commission and the Environmental Protection Division (EPD). The primary goal of these revisions is to clarify definitions for various types of burning (residential, agricultural, development-related, and prescribed) and to empower the Fire Chief to prohibit burning during unsafe weather conditions or air quality risks.

DISCUSSION OF AN AMENDMENT TO PART II, CHAPTER 30 - ENVIRONMENT, ARTICLE X - TREE PROTECTION & PRESERVATION OF THE EFFINGHAM COUNTY CODE OF ORDINANCES (3):

Planner I Rose presented updated tree protection standards for the county, introducing measurable canopy requirements and enhanced enforcement mechanisms. The amendments seek to move away from a "waiver-based" system to a standardized regulatory framework for development projects.

Mike Vaquer, representative of Homebuilders of Greater Savannah, expressed concern regarding several critical areas of the proposed tree ordinance, including the ambiguity surrounding the definition of protected trees and the logistical challenges of the land disturbance permitting process. Mr. Vaquer requested that the ordinance be tabled for 90 days.

Rita Elliot, Representative of Effingham Georgia Green expressed gratitude to the commissioners and staff for the significant improvements made to the current draft of the tree ordinance. While acknowledging the progress, Ms. Elliot emphasized that further technical adjustments are necessary to ensure the long-term survival of the county's canopy. Key among these is the strict prohibition of planting during summer months and the necessity of having all plans reviewed by a certified arborist to ensure species diversity and health.

Ryan Thompson, Landscape Architect provided a technical critique of the proposed ordinance, focusing on refining how the county manages species diversity and land-use integration. Thompson suggested the implementation of a more exhaustive tree list and a tiered mitigation system. This approach would require higher mitigation standards for high-value or preferred species compared to non-preferred varieties, ensuring that the ecological quality of the canopy, rather than just the quantity, is maintained during development.

III – ADJOURNMENT

At 5:12 pm, there was no further discussion, the meeting was adjourned.

Damon M. Rahn, Chairman

Stephanie D. Johnson, County Clerk

APPROVED BY THE BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS
FEBRUARY 17, 2026