



APPROVED 6/18/2026

# MINUTES

## City Commission Meeting

6:00 PM – Thursday, May 21, 2026 – City Hall

**Invocation:** Reverend Kristina Spaude, Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Lake County

**Pledge of Allegiance:** Vice Mayor Gary Ashcraft

**Call to Order:** 6:03 p.m.

### Acknowledge of Quorum and Proper Notice

**PRESENT:** Vice Mayor Gary Ashcraft, Commissioner Willie L. Hawkins, Commissioner Michael Holland, Commissioner George Asbate, Mayor Emily A. Lee

### 1. Agenda Update

Interim City Manager Rick Gierok informed the Commission that staff removed Agenda Item 5.1 and moved it to the June 4, 2026, meeting. After the agenda materials were published, staff discovered inconsistencies in the documentation, particularly references to waiver requests. They needed additional time to make clarifications in order to have an accurate record. He noted that members of the public could either provide comments at this meeting or wait to speak on the item when it returns.

Commissioner Asbate wanted to clarify that the Doris Park matter was being postponed until June 4th since most of the attendees present appeared to be here specifically for that item. Interim City Manager Gierok confirmed that the Doris Park item would be moved to the June 4th meeting. He also noted that Agenda Items 5.10 and 5.11, relating to developers' agreements, would be moved ahead of Item 5.2 for better clarity and meeting flow.

Mayor Lee asked if the Commission was comfortable with the proposed agenda rearrangement. The consensus of the Commission was that the change was acceptable.

Interim City Manager Gierok explained that he had speaker cards prepared for the postponed item and could proceed with public comments during the current meeting if desired. He reminded attendees that they were welcome to defer their comments until the June 4th meeting.

### 2. Presentations

#### 2.1 City of Eustis Grants Planning Update

Grant Writing Coordinator Veronica Whetro explained that she has been working closely with multiple departments and the city's grant successes have been a result of strong collaboration among department heads, directors, and staff members. Several departments have already participated in grant applications. She thanked staff for their assistance in gathering the information needed to pursue funding opportunities.

Ms. Whetro reported that the city currently has eleven active grants and has secured more than \$1.5 million in grant funding. An additional \$1.2 million in grant applications has been submitted and is awaiting award decisions. Including projects currently under development and planned submissions, the city's total grant pipeline now exceeds \$3.5 million. Funding was

awarded for life-saving medical equipment that would serve adults, pediatric patients, and infants, including a video laryngoscope. Grants secured for the police department, include tactical vests and a drone. In addition, the city's Community Development Block Grant-Mitigation (CDBG-MIT) funding will support roadway improvements benefiting both residents and city infrastructure.

Ms. Whetro explained that her grant development strategy focuses on identifying projects, equipment, and services that advance city priorities while helping to reduce costs from taxpayers. She consistently researches funding opportunities, aligns grant applications with the city's capital improvement priorities, and works proactively to prepare projects early for future submissions. The city plans to implement a formal grants policy in the future to help guide and organize the process.

Commissioner Asbate noted that it was encouraging to see the city's grant program moving forward again, adding that the funding efforts would provide important benefits for taxpayers. Ms. Whetro stated that the collaborative environment within the city has made the work both productive and rewarding.

### **3. Audience to be Heard**

Nadine Bobick, a Eustis resident, said she wanted to provide background on earlier city discussions from 2023 regarding plans to transform CR 44B into what she describes as an urbanizing corridor. She commented that the residents oppose efforts to commercialize and increase density along what has traditionally been a semi-rural residential roadway. She noted concerns about the nearby Huddle property development, particularly its placement in a floodplain and the addition of townhouses and commercial uses. Promised community meetings with developers never occurred and approvals later moved forward without public discussion. She expressed concerns about traffic safety, flooding, and a variance allowing a fast-food drive-through exit onto CR 44B.

Daniel DiVenanzo, a local business owner, stated that development rights for the property had effectively been established long ago and that population growth in the area is inevitable. He noted that property values have risen significantly and suggested that residents who seek a more rural lifestyle may eventually need to relocate farther out. He commented that he had recently traveled to Spain, which inspired some ideas for beautification projects in Eustis, including landscaping, fountains, and public gathering spaces. He expressed interest in becoming more involved with Eustis in Bloom.

Mark Bobick, a Eustis resident and board member for Park Place at Lake Joanna, opposed the current Doris Park proposal. He argued that it would create dangerous traffic conditions, increase flooding risks, and negatively impact property values. He did not agree with the efforts to transform a rural roadway into an urbanized commercial corridor with heavily congested roads. Development aimed primarily at maximizing profit does not necessarily serve the public interest and excessive urbanization could undermine Eustis' appeal and identity.

Dennis Spivey, a resident of Lakes of Mount Dora stated there were already several projects approved or under construction, including Yardley, Block 11 Park, and Doris Park Landing, which total an estimated 644 additional homes accessing the roadway. Traffic congestion is already severe, and residents are experiencing long delays entering or exiting the corridor. He noted concerns about drainage, infrastructure strain, and the loss of the airport buffer separating nearby communities.

Diane Nichols, a resident of Lakes of Mount Dora, said Doris Park Landing could further diminish the residents' quality of life through increased traffic, noise, and light pollution. She

asked the city to require protective measures such as fencing, additional landscaping buffers, and commitments to address drainage issues before and after construction. She advised the importance of maintaining a positive relationship between the development and neighboring communities.

Roger Wray, a nearby resident, commented that road widening is not currently scheduled until 2031 despite existing congestion. He indicated that he experienced severe backups during both morning and afternoon traffic periods. He asked the commission to consider whether existing infrastructure can realistically support additional development before approving further projects.

George King, a resident of Park Place, agreed and indicated that he experienced significant delays and difficulty entering traffic on CR 44B and additional development would make conditions even more dangerous. He commented that residents are already struggling to navigate the roadway safely, and he questioned how much more traffic that corridor could accommodate.

B.J. McCarty, president of the Park Place, stated that the residents were not opposed to growth itself; however, they are deeply concerned that infrastructure has failed to keep pace. He commented that dangerous traffic conditions make it difficult for residents and emergency vehicles to access neighborhoods. He cautioned about water shortages and drainage concerns due to cumulative effects of multiple large developments in the area. He asked the city to tie future development approvals to concrete infrastructure improvements, including roads, utilities, drainage, and emergency access because public safety should take precedence over rapid expansion.

#### **4. Consent Agenda**

- 4.1 Resolution Number 2026-41: Emergency Management Plan Update 2026
- 4.2 Resolution Number 2026-44: Palmetto Plaza Park Playground Improvements Project
- 4.3 Resolution Number 2026-46: Approval to amend the FY 2025/2026 Adopted Budget for the Police Forfeiture Fund (012) to recognize Federal forfeiture receipts received in FY 2025/2026 and to allocate funding for eligible expenditures
- 4.4 Resolution Number 2026-47: EPD School Resource Officer Agreement (2026-2027 School Year)

Motion made by Commissioner Holland, Seconded by Vice Mayor Ashcraft to approve the Consent Agenda. The motion passed on the following vote.

Voting Yea: Vice Mayor Ashcraft, Commissioner Hawkins, Commissioner Holland, Commissioner Asbate, Mayor Lee

#### **5. Ordinances, Public Hearings, & Quasi-Judicial Hearings**

- 5.1 Resolution Number 2026-45: Preliminary Subdivision Plat for Doris Park Landing (S-26-001) for Parcels with Alternate Key Numbers 1784077, 1784140, 2535628, 1444756 and 2585153.

This item was removed from the agenda and postponed to the date certain of June 4, 2026.

- 5.2 Second Reading of Ordinance Number 2026-17: Approval of a Development Agreement with W.D. of America, Inc.

City Attorney Garcia read Ordinance Number 2026-17 by title, an ordinance of the City Commission of the City of Eustis, Lake County, Florida, amending the City of Eustis comprehensive plan pursuant to Section 163.3187, Florida statutes; changing the future land use designation of approximately 2.8 acres of real property proposed for annexation into the City of Eustis at alternate key number 3959037, generally located on the east side of the intersection of County Road 44 and County Road 44A.

Interim Director of Development Services Jeff Richardson explained that revisions were made to the development agreement following prior discussions, and the primary changes involved permitted and prohibited uses for the proposed commercial development. He clarified that restaurants with a drive-thru would still be permitted, but only if the drive-thru lanes did not face north toward County Road 44A or south toward Spring Ridge Estates. He noted that additional prohibited uses were added to the agreement, including gas stations, convenience stores, retail alcohol sales, vehicle-related businesses, repair shops, sales and leasing operations, and car washes and clarified that these revisions reflected concerns previously raised by residents and commissioners.

City Attorney Garcia opened the public hearing at 6:40 p.m.

Robin Elaine Lawrence, a Lake County resident, said while growth is inevitable, development decisions must be made responsibly with careful consideration of environmental impacts, drainage, flooding, traffic congestion, and neighborhood safety. She asked the city to provide transparency regarding traffic studies, flood mitigation plans, and long-term community impacts because many residents in the district oppose the proposed strip mall.

Trena Marquez stated that she conducted a survey, and forty-two residents preferred residential homes over commercial development, while one person supported commercial uses and another expressed no preference. She indicated that nearly all residents commented on concerns about noise, traffic, and overall quality of life impacts associated with the proposal.

Donald Doyle said he would prefer the land to be developed according to the original planned unit development that was already in place when the property was purchased. He explained that he appreciated the revisions that were made to the development agreement, particularly the prohibition of gas stations and alcohol sales. However, he was still concerned about allowing restaurants with a drive-through because they would increase traffic congestion and create noise and safety issues for nearby residential areas. He requested that the commission prohibit drive-thrus entirely or at least limit restaurant operating hours.

Cindy Newton asked the city and developer to require at least the 100-year stormwater retention standards for the project. She noted that FEMA was reviewing similar requirements for larger storm events. She asked to relocate the retention pond further north with additional protective features to reduce flood risks for Spring Ridge Estates residents.

Developer Travis Sawchuk responded that he had worked collaboratively with the city and community throughout the process and indicated that the proposal is not intended to be a traditional strip mall but rather a village center featuring boutique-style buildings, landscaping, gathering spaces, fountains, and pedestrian-friendly design elements. He provided information that he intentionally pursued annexation and a development agreement with the city to ensure higher standards and local oversight rather than pursuing development through the county. He reported that drainage and traffic concerns would be addressed during subsequent engineering and permitting phases.

Daniel DiVenanzo stated that after he reviewed the proposal closely, he noted that the developer had made significant efforts to respond to community concerns. He indicated that the project resembled a village-style commercial center rather than a traditional strip mall and the city would benefit from additional tax revenue.

City Attorney Garcia closed the public hearing at 6:52 p.m.

Commissioner Asbate stated he did not support reckless growth, but growth was a reality. He commented that the city needs to maintain control over development along a key corridor rather than risk the property being developed under county jurisdiction with fewer restrictions. He indicated that many residents would prefer no development, but that outcome was unrealistic. He advised that annexation into the city allows us to shape the project rather than relinquish control.

Commissioner Holland agreed and noted that both city staff and the developer have worked to address the concerns.

Motion made by Commissioner Holland, Seconded by Commissioner Hawkins, to approve Ordinance Number 2026-17. The motion passed on the following vote.

Voting Yea: Vice Mayor Ashcraft, Commissioner Hawkins, Commissioner Holland, Commissioner Asbate, Mayor Lee

### 5.3 Second Reading of Ordinance Number 2026-18: Approval of a Development Agreement with T & S FL Partners, Inc.

City Attorney Garcia introduced Ordinance Number 2026-18 by title, an ordinance of the City of Eustis, Florida, approving a development agreement between the City of Eustis and T & S, Florida Partners, Inc., pursuant to Sections 163.3220-163.3243, Florida statutes, providing for authorization to execute, providing for reporting, providing for conflicts, providing for severability, and providing for an effective date.

Interim Director of Development Services, Richardson explained that the amended agreement primarily addressed prohibited uses for the property. He clarified that while no changes were made to the list of permitted uses, additional restrictions were added to prohibit various vehicle-related businesses, including vehicle repair facilities, service operations, vehicle sales and leasing, and car wash establishments. He noted that indoor and outdoor shooting ranges were explicitly prohibited within the development agreement, and outdoor ranges were already prohibited under the existing zoning classification.

City Attorney Garcia opened the public hearing at 6:56 p.m.

Trena Marquez stated that while developers are entitled to make a profit, she believed development should proceed under the existing planned unit development rather than through expanded commercial uses. She asked the commission to listen to community concerns and maintain Eustis' hometown appeal rather than allowing another concrete jungle.

City Attorney Garcia closed the public hearing at 6:58 pm.

Motion made by Commissioner Holland, Seconded by Commissioner Hawkins to approve Ordinance Number 2026-18 on second reading. The motion passed on the following vote.

Voting Yea: Vice Mayor Ashcraft, Commissioner Hawkins, Commissioner Holland, Commissioner Asbate, Mayor Lee

### 5.4 Explanation of Ordinance Numbers 2026-06, 2026-07, and 2026-08 for Parcel with Alternate Key Number 1040141

City Attorney Garcia noted that there would be no additional presentation for Ordinance Numbers 2026-06, 2026-07 and 2026-08.

**5.5 Second Reading of Ordinance Number 2026-06 for Voluntary Annexation for Parcel with Alternate Key Number 1040141**

City Attorney Garcia introduced Ordinance Number 2026-06 by title, an ordinance of the City Commission of the City of Eustis, Florida, voluntarily annexing approximately 10 acres of real property at Lake County Property Appraisers alternate key number 1040141, located in Unincorporated Lake County, Florida, on the east side of the intersection of County Road 44 and County Road 44A

City Attorney Garcia opened the public hearing at 6:59 p.m.

Charlene Timmerman, a resident of Clear Lake Drive, remarked that she had concerns that government was not adequately listening to residents regarding future development decisions. She questioned whether supporting infrastructure such as roads, schools, churches, and grocery stores is keeping pace with population growth. She commented on traffic and roadway safety concerns near the intersection of County Road 44 and County Road 44A and described that the roadway is dangerous due to heavy traffic volumes, speeding vehicles, and limited visibility caused by changes in elevation along the road. She noted concerns with the Lake County School Board regarding school bus safety along the corridor, and school officials agreed that the roadway conditions were hazardous. She indicated that she was against commercial development on this site due to increased congestion, traffic accidents, and unsafe ingress and egress near the intersection with concerns about potential flooding impacts on neighboring properties. She asked the commission to carefully consider the long-term consequences of continued growth.

City Attorney Garcia closed the public hearing at 7:03 p.m.

Motion made by Commissioner Holland, Seconded by Commissioner Hawkins to approve Ordinance Number 2026-06 on second reading. The motion passed on the following vote.

Voting Yea: Vice Mayor Ashcraft, Commissioner Hawkins, Commissioner Holland, Commissioner Asbate, Mayor Lee

**5.6 Second Reading of Ordinance Number 2026-07: Comprehensive Plan Amendment for Parcel with Alternate Key Number 1040141**

City Attorney Garcia introduced Ordinance Number 2026-07 by title, an ordinance of the City Commission of the City of Eustis, Lake County, Florida, amending the City of Eustis comprehensive plan pursuant to Section 163.3187, Florida statutes; changing the future land use designation of approximately 10 acres of real property proposed for annexation into the City of Eustis at alternate key number 1040141, generally located on the east side of the intersection of County Road 44 and County Road 44A.

City Attorney Garcia opened the public hearing at 7:04 p.m.

Robin Lawrence, a Lake County resident, wanted to know where the displaced wildlife would relocate as additional land is developed. She described that she already observed animals being pushed into residential neighborhoods in other growing areas. She indicated concern about the possibility of 24-hour drive-through restaurants because such businesses could attract crime and negatively affect nearby neighborhoods. She asked the commission to carefully consider the long-term consequences of development on both residents and wildlife before approving additional commercial uses.

Travis Sawchuk explained that there are nearby wetland protection areas and wildlife corridors surrounding Lake Swatara and adjacent properties that would remain intact and continue to provide habitat for local wildlife. He commented that the property under discussion had already been cleared in compliance with applicable regulations and the project would not significantly disrupt wildlife movement patterns. He indicated that his plans did not include a 24-hour restaurant, and he personally lives nearby and would not support that type of operation next to his own property.

City Attorney Garcia closed the public hearing at 7:08 p.m.

Motion made by Commissioner Holland, Seconded by Commissioner Hawkins to approve Ordinance Number 2026-07. The motion passed on the following vote.

Voting Yea: Vice Mayor Ashcraft, Commissioner Hawkins, Commissioner Holland, Commissioner Asbate, Mayor Lee

**5.7 Second Reading of Ordinance Number 2026-08: Design District Assignment for Parcel with Alternate Key Number 1040141**

City Attorney Garcia introduced Ordinance Number 2026-08 by title, an ordinance of the City Commission of the City of Eustis, Lake County, Florida; assigning the suburban corridor design district designation to approximately 10 acres of real property proposed for annexation into the City of Eustis at alternate key number 1040141, generally located on the east side of the intersection of County Road 44 and County Road 44A

City Attorney Garcia opened the public hearing at 7:09 p.m.

Trena Marquez stated she appreciated the efforts commissioners had made through the development agreement process to address neighborhood concerns. However, she would prefer that the property be developed only under the existing planned unit development already in place.

City Attorney Garcia closed the public hearing at 7:09 p.m.

Motion made by Commissioner Holland, Seconded by Commissioner Hawkins to approve Ordinance Number 2026-08 on second reading. The motion passed on the following vote.

Voting Yea: Vice Mayor Ashcraft, Commissioner Hawkins, Commissioner Holland, Commissioner Asbate, Mayor Lee

**5.8 Explanation of Ordinance Numbers 2026-09, 2026-10, and 2026-11 for Parcel with Alternate Key Number 3959037**

City Attorney Garcia noted that there would be no additional presentation for Ordinance Numbers 2026-09, 2026-10 and 2026-11.

**5.9 Second Reading of Ordinance Number 2026-09 for Voluntary Annexation for Parcel with Alternate Key Number 3959037**

City Attorney Garcia introduced Ordinance Number 2026-09 by title, an ordinance of the City Commission of the City of Eustis, Florida, voluntarily annexing approximately 2.8 acres of real property at Lake County Property Appraisers alternate key number 3959037, generally located in Unincorporated Lake County, Florida, on the east side of the intersection of County Road 44 and County Road 44A.

City Attorney Garcia opened the public hearing at 7:11 p.m.

Robin Lawrence questioned whether the city could guarantee that wildlife habitats would not be affected by construction and reiterated concerns regarding the possibility of 24-hour drive-through operations. She asked the commission to consider adding restrictions to prevent businesses from operating around the clock and establish reasonable operating hours to minimize impacts on nearby residents.

Interim Director of Development Services, Richardson clarified that the MCI zoning did not include restaurants as a permitted use and noted.

Commissioner Ashcraft clarified that he believed she was referring to the other piece of property.

Developer Travis Sawchuk stated that he had no intention of operating a 24-hour restaurant and would support formally prohibiting that use within the development agreement. He commented that he would prefer a business model like a Chick-Fil-A, with limited hours of operation, and a reasonable closing time such as 10:00 p.m.

City Attorney Garcia confirmed that the restriction could be added without delaying the approval process.

Travis Sawchuk stated he was agreeable with businesses being open until 10:00 p.m.

City Attorney Garcia closed the public hearing at 7:14 p.m.

Motion made by Commissioner Holland, Seconded by Commissioner Hawkins to approve Ordinance Number 2026-09 on second reading. The motion passed on the following vote.

Voting Yea: Vice Mayor Ashcraft, Commissioner Hawkins, Commissioner Holland, Commissioner Asbate, Mayor Lee

#### 5.10 Second Reading of Ordinance Number 2026-10: Comprehensive Plan Amendment for Parcel with Alternate Key Number 3959037

City Attorney Garcia introduced Ordinance Number 2026-10 by title, an ordinance of the City Commission of the City of Eustis, Lake County, Florida, amending the City of Eustis comprehensive plan pursuant to Section 163.3187, Florida statutes; changing the future land use designation of approximately 2.8 acres of real property proposed for annexation into the City of Eustis at alternate key number 3959037, generally located on the east side of the intersection of County Road 44 and County Road 44A.

City Attorney Garcia opened the public hearing at 7:15 p.m., and with no public comments offered, she closed the public hearing at 7:15 p.m.

Motion made by Commissioner Holland, Seconded by Commissioner Hawkins to approve Ordinance Number 2026-10 on second reading. The motion passed on the following vote.

Voting Yea: Vice Mayor Ashcraft, Commissioner Hawkins, Commissioner Holland, Commissioner Asbate, Mayor Lee

#### 5.11 Second Reading of Ordinance Number 2026-11: Design District Assignment for Parcel with Alternate Key Number 3959037

City Attorney Garcia introduced Ordinance Number 2026-11 by title, an ordinance of the City Commission of the City of Eustis, Lake County, Florida; assigning the suburban corridor (SC) design district designation to approximately 2.8 acres of real property proposed for annexation into the City of Eustis at alternate key number 3959037,

generally located on the east side of the intersection of County Road 44 and County Road 44A.

City Attorney Garcia opened the public hearing at 7:16 p.m., and with no public comments offered, she closed the public hearing at 7:16 p.m.

Motion made by Commissioner Holland, Seconded by Commissioner Hawkins to approve Ordinance Number 2026-11 on second reading. The motion passed on the following vote.

Voting Yea: Vice Mayor Ashcraft, Commissioner Hawkins, Commissioner Holland, Commissioner Asbate, Mayor Lee

Commissioner Ashcraft explained that nearly every commission meeting is centered on development proposals while the city's ability to restrict growth appeared increasingly constrained by state law. He referred to the Bert Harris Act, Senate Bill 180, annexations, zoning restrictions, stormwater requirements, and utility expansion. He asked what legal tools remained available to local governments to slow down and manage growth responsibly.

Mayor Lee asked the city attorney to explain the legal limitations. Commissioner Hawkins agreed because there are more residents than builders; however, if residents are not happy, they need to reach out to Tallahassee because we need to get their attention.

Commissioner Holland added that if Senate Bill 180 passes, we will see some revisions to the bill, but we may not be happy with all the changes, and Eustis cannot be the only ones up in Tallahassee telling them that this level of development is hurting the smaller communities. He commented that he does not like to vote on these items, but we have too, and if we deny then lawsuits will result.

City Attorney Garcia explained that Senate Bill 180, enacted by the Florida Legislature following multiple hurricanes impacting the state, effectively freezes many local government land-use regulations through October 2027. She stated that municipalities cannot adopt new comprehensive plan amendments or development regulations that would make development standards more restrictive during that period. She indicated that many local governments, including Eustis, are limited in their ability to deny or substantially alter development proposals without risking legal challenges. She commented that voluntary development agreements, such as those negotiated with developer Travis Sawchuk, remain one of the few available tools for obtaining additional restrictions or concessions from developers.

Vice Mayor Ashcraft stated that residents who are unhappy with current growth policies should direct their concerns toward state lawmakers in Tallahassee because legislature had largely removed control from cities and counties.

Commissioner Holland agreed, noting that many small communities across Florida are facing similar frustrations under Senate Bill 180. He suggested residents join local officials in lobbying state representatives for legislative changes because legal challenges and lawsuits could arise if cities attempt to block development contrary to state law.

Mayor Lee agreed. She mentioned that local officials are often blamed by residents despite having limited authority under state mandates. She encouraged citizens to contact their state legislators and advocate for restoring greater local control over growth management decisions.

Commissioner Hawkins commented that the city should continue searching for legal and practical ways to slow growth while remaining compliant with state law.

Mayor Lee called for a brief recess at 7:24 p.m. and the Mayor reconvened at 7:30 p.m.

- 5.12 First Reading of Ordinance Number 2026-26: Amendment to the City of Eustis Municipal Firefighters' Pension and Retirement System City Attorney Garcia introduced Ordinance No. 2026-26, an ordinance of the City Commission of the City of Eustis, Lake County, Florida, amending Chapter 70, Pensions and Retirement, Article III, City of Eustis Municipal Firefighters' Pension and Retirement System, Section 70-69, Titled "Retirement Age" of the City's Code of Ordinances and providing an effective date.

City Attorney Garcia stated that this ordinance would amend the City Code to revise the normal retirement date for covered members of the firefighters' pension plan. She noted the amendment is intended to implement pension provisions that were negotiated and agreed upon as part of the collective bargaining agreement covering Fiscal Years 2024 through 2027 between the City and the International Association of Fire Fighters (IAFF) Local 4731. She advised that the proposed changes were reviewed by the Firefighters Pension Board of Trustees, who subsequently recommended approval of the ordinance. She indicated that under the proposed revision, a covered member's normal retirement date would occur upon the earlier of two conditions: reaching age 55 with at least 10 years of credited service or completing 25 years of credited service regardless of age. She explained that this change modifies the existing normal retirement provisions and is intended to align the pension plan with the terms negotiated in the collective bargaining agreement. City Attorney Garcia clarified that the ordinance does not alter the plan's existing early retirement provisions, which would remain in effect without modification.

City Attorney Garcia commented that the ordinance is supported by an Actuarial Impact Statement (AIS) prepared by Foster & Foster on February 10, 2026. She advised that the actuarial analysis was included in the agenda packet and serves as the legally required basis for evaluating the financial impact of the proposed pension amendment. She reported that the ordinance is intended to maintain compliance with Chapters 112 and 175 of the Florida Statutes, as well as Article X, Section 14 of the Florida Constitution. She reviewed that the Actuarial Impact Statement notes that the proposed change is expected to increase the pension plan's minimum required contributions and related funding obligations. She indicated that the analysis also incorporates the negotiated allocation of Chapter 175 premium tax revenues, a portion of which will be directed toward offsetting the additional costs associated with lowering the normal retirement threshold. As a result, while the retirement eligibility change creates additional financial obligations for the pension system, she commented that some of those costs are expected to be mitigated through the dedicated premium tax revenue allocation that was negotiated as part of the overall agreement.

City staff recommended approval of the ordinance because it implements pension provisions that have already been ratified through the collective bargaining process between the City and IAFF Local 4731, and the adoption of the ordinance will preserve the pension plan's state-accepted status and ensure that the amendment is supported by the actuarial analysis required by law.

City Attorney Garcia concluded that the ordinance did not affect private business activity regulated by the City and therefore the Business Impact Estimate (BIE) exemption does not apply.

Attorney Garcia opened the public hearing at 7:33 p.m. There were no public comments offered, and she closed the public hearing at 7:33 p.m.

Motion made by Commissioner Holland, Seconded by Commissioner Hawkins to approve Ordinance Number 2026-26 on first reading. The motion passed on the following vote.

Voting Yea: Vice Mayor Ashcraft, Commissioner Hawkins, Commissioner Holland, Commissioner Asbate, Mayor Lee

## **6. Future Agenda Items and Comments**

### **6.1 City Attorney**

City Attorney Garcia reported on the Spring Ridge matter that the community's legal counsel had requested additional time to review the proposed agreement, and they would like to schedule a follow-up meeting with the City.

City Attorney Garcia indicated she would provide an update on the marijuana dispensary ordinance and noted that a working version of the ordinance had been provided to Attorney Sutphen for redlining for city staff to prepare a more complete memorandum for the commission's review.

### **6.2 City Manager**

Interim City Manager Gierok noted that tomorrow would be busy, beginning with the Veterans Memorial unveiling at the cemetery at 9:00 a.m. After the unveiling concludes around 9:45 a.m., the CIP workshop is scheduled to go from 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.

With regards to the City Manager recruitment brochure, he received the final round of comments, which were minor. The consultant would be sending a revised version back to him and the publication was expected to go out early to mid-next week.

Interim City Manager Gierok indicated moving to the RFQ for the Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA) surplus lots, and the selection committee met and awarded the project to Habitat for Humanity. He indicated receipt of the Construction Manager at Risk RFQ, and ten submissions were received and are currently under evaluation. He indicated that the selection committee will meet with the intent to award and assemble a construction management team.

Interim City Manager explained that he and the Deputy City Manager met earlier in the week with Representative Fine's office to discuss potential grant funding opportunities, including stormwater-related projects for Estes and Spring Ridge. He noted that no specific commitments were made at this time, but the office planned to follow up with additional information.

### **6.3 City Commission**

Commissioner Asbate suggested that the city consider adding sunset clauses to annexation and land-use approvals as such provisions would cause development entitlements to expire if projects do not proceed within defined timelines, which would prevent outdated approvals from creating long-term planning issues for the city. He noted that with older development entitlements remaining active for decades this reform would improve accountability and reduce future complications in land-use governance. He then stated he was frustrated with delays in development-related matters and was concerned about recent ordinance discussions, that include the medical marijuana ban and land-use rights for existing businesses. He commented that, at this time, he lacked confidence in the city's current legal support structure, with communication breakdowns and delays with responsiveness, and he remarked that these issues contribute to inefficiency, increased costs, and confusion in decision-making. Commissioner Asbate indicated that taxpayer funds are being negatively impacted by excessive reliance on outside legal billing, and the city should consider restructuring its legal

services, including the possibility of hiring an in-house attorney or transitioning to a different model.

Vice Mayor Ashcraft responded that he supported the idea and that specialized legal expertise is important, particularly in land-use, zoning, and annexation matters, which represents a significant portion of city commission work. He commented that the city would benefit from experienced counsel capable of helping guide complex development decisions and suggested that current arrangements be reviewed to ensure adequate expertise is available.

Commissioner Asbate noted concerns about the city's financial responsibilities to taxpayers; the city is spending more money than ever before without achieving meaningful results. He explained that the lack of progress has left him with no confidence in the current situation with the city's legal representation, and he does not feel comfortable confiding in the city attorney so instead he has to seek advice from a private attorney at his own expense which is not how the system is supposed to function and is contrary to the responsibilities elected officials were entrusted to carry out. He advised that change is necessary, and while change can be difficult, it is often beneficial, and the time has come for a change in the city's current direction.

Commissioner Hawkins stated that he had full confidence in the current city attorney. In his experience, the attorney has been responsive and accessible, and he has been able to obtain needed information when requested. While response times may occasionally be affected by workload, he did not believe there was a systemic issue or any risk to the city's interests. The city already retains a specialized land-use attorney for technical matters, so the current structure already provides targeted expertise where needed.

Commissioner Hawkins reminded everyone that graduation would take place the next day, and it is scheduled to begin at 7:30 p.m. He commented that the Lady Panthers event is tomorrow at 4:00 p.m. He mentioned that last week he attended the First Responders Appreciation Event at W.I.N.1 Ministries and several city officials attended the event, and he thanked the police chief, W.I.N.1 Ministries, and Pastor Renee for organizing the event. He noted that the Lake County Sheriff was present and recognized during the program. The event was a success and an example of the positive things taking place in the city.

Commissioner Asbate mentioned that he was not finished with his comments. He said he had asked commissioners for their thoughts on the issue and appreciated the opportunity to continue the conversation. The matter involving the city attorney presented an opportunity for the commission to consider expanding the city's legal resources for the benefit of the community. He indicated an interest in exploring the possibility of hiring an in-house attorney as an alternative and wanted to hear additional input from other commissioners. He does not have any personal experience with the process of replacing or reappointing a city attorney. However, there is a lack of confidence and guidance from the current city attorney. He asked that the commission should carefully consider the issue, continue discussing the matter, and determine whether any direction should be provided regarding how the city would proceed.

Vice Mayor Ashcraft asked if the city had a land use attorney, and Mayor Lee said yes.

Commissioner Asbate indicated an interest in why the city was not being advised toward a different approach, suggesting it may not be financially beneficial. He did not want to focus on blame or negativity, but it is time for the city to move forward and transition, proposing a 30-day period to consider options such as appointing an interim land-use attorney while evaluating whether to move to an in-house attorney or continue with an outsourced attorney. He stated there were problems with the current legal agreement; however, he did not elaborate publicly, but he noted it was time for the city to make a change and move forward.

Commissioner Holland requested that the issue of city attorney services be formally placed on a future agenda for full commission discussion. He noted the need for a structured, transparent review that includes staff input, cost analysis, and operational considerations. He cautioned that any transition to an in-house model would likely require additional staffing and administrative support and pointed out the importance of understanding all financial and operational implications before making decisions. Commissioner Hawkins agreed with placing the item on a future agenda.

City Attorney Garcia stated that she was in a difficult position and could not fully defend herself during an open meeting. She explained that responding in detail could require discussion of sensitive or confidential matters that would not be appropriate for public disclosure. She indicated that she would not speak negatively about any commissioner, and her role requires professional restraint in such discussions.

Commissioner Asbate pointed out that he wanted to raise the need to formally recognize a well-known community member who recently passed, Timothy Totten who was highly influential and deeply involved in helping others both publicly and behind the scenes. Commissioner Asbate asked that the city consider a formal honor such as naming a street after him or taking other steps of recognition. He commented that Mr. Totten had a reputation for being supportive and responsive to community needs and would like the commission to consider ways of honoring him.

Interim City Manager Gierok responded that staff were already planning a memorial bench at Ferran Park with a commemorative plaque and staff had been coordinating with the family. He welcomed additional ideas from the commission.

Mayor Lee mentioned that the city should prepare a proclamation in his honor as well as his name being attached to the Amazing Race event.

Commissioner Asbate remarked that he was concerned that TEDxEustis may be moved to Mount Dora. He heard efforts were underway to take the program out of Eustis. Commissioner Hawkins stated that it had already happened. Commissioner Asbate then asked about how the program was structured, including whether it operates under a franchise model and what steps, if any, the city would need to take to retain or reestablish it locally. Commissioner Hawkins suggested that the program may have previously functioned under a franchise arrangement. Mayor Lee noted that securing someone to run the program locally would be a significant undertaking.

Deputy City Manager Miranda Burrowes clarified that it was her understanding that TEDxEustis was still operating in Eustis and was included in the city's budget, but she would confirm the status.

Commissioner Hawkins added that were recent developments over the weekend that prompted the discussion.

Commissioner Asbate reiterated that the program was being moved to Mount Dora, and it was frustrating that successful local initiatives were being taken by other municipalities. He advised strengthening incentive programs, gateway funding, and downtown development grants to better compete with surrounding municipalities. He noted some businesses have left after receiving support so he would like the city to consider safeguards such as repayment provisions if businesses relocate after benefiting from incentives. It is important to position the city competitively as the downtown development expands.

Interim City Manager Gierok responded that staff were developing ideas and would bring a formal plan back to the commission for review. He noted that it would need to be incorporated into the upcoming budget process.

Vice Mayor Ashcraft requested that commission be provided with updates on Lakeshore Drive, the city's internal trail system, and ongoing coordination on regional trail efforts. He noted that the River to Hills Trails project was already under construction and asked that status updates be shared via email with the commission for efficiency. He commented that the high school girls' softball team defeated Wakulla 14 to 7 and advanced to the state championship game which is scheduled for tomorrow at 4:00 p.m. against Coral Springs Charter School at the Boombah Sports Complex.

#### 6.4 Mayor

Mayor Lee said while reflecting on a recent visit from America in Bloom, evaluators praised the city's landscaping and downtown beautification efforts. She credited city staff for their work in preparing for the visit and communicated the positive impression made on the evaluators. She indicated an appreciation for the ongoing beautification efforts and the commission's support.

#### 7. Adjournment: 8:08 p.m.

*\*These minutes reflect the actions taken and portions of the discussion during the meeting. To review the entire discussion concerning any agenda item, go to [www.eustis.org](http://www.eustis.org) and click on the video for the meeting. If available, the video recording may be accessible at <https://www.youtube.com/@EustisComRel/streams> or an audio recording may be requested from the office of the City Clerk.*

  
CHRISTINE HALLORAN  
City Clerk

  
EMILY A. LEE  
Mayor/Commissioner