

Town Council Meeting

May 27, 2025 at 6:00 PM

**Howey-in the-Hills Town Hall
101 N. Palm Ave.,
Howey-in-the-Hills, FL 34737**

MINUTES

Mayor Wells called the Town Council Special Meeting to order at 6:00 p.m.
Mayor Wells led the attendees in the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag.
Councilor Reneé Lannamañ delivered an invocation.

ROLL CALL

Acknowledgement of Quorum Present and Proper Notice Given

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Mayor Pro Tem Tim Everline | Councilor Jon Arnold | Councilor Reneé Lannamañ | Councilor David Miles | Mayor Graham Wells

STAFF PRESENT:

Sean O'Keefe, Town Manager | Tom Wilkes, Town Attorney (via Zoom) | Rick Thomas, Police Chief | Michael Giddens, Police Department Lieutenant | Public Services Director, Morgan Cates | Oscar Ojeda, Finance Supervisor | Amanda Moldan, Library Director | John Brock, Deputy Town Manager / Town Clerk

WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION OF GUESTS

None

AGENDA APPROVAL/REVIEW

Motion made by Mayor Wells to move agenda item #4 (Consideration and Approval: Library Board Member Selection) to appear directly after the Consent Agenda; seconded by Councilor Lannamañ. Motion approved unanimously by voice vote.

Voting

Yea: Mayor Pro Tem Everline, Councilor Arnold, Councilor Lannamañ, Councilor Miles, Mayor Wells
Nay: None

Motion made by Councilor Miles to approve the meeting's agenda as amended; seconded by Councilor Arnold. Motion approved unanimously by voice vote.

Voting

Yea: Mayor Pro Tem Everline, Councilor Arnold, Councilor Lannamañ, Councilor Miles, Mayor Wells
Nay: None

PUBLIC QUESTION & COMMENT

Any person wishing to address the Mayor and Town Council and who is not on the agenda is asked to speak their name and address. Three (3) minutes is allocated per speaker. The general Public Question & Comment period will be limited to a maximum of thirty (30) minutes unless extended by the Presiding Officer.

William Sullivan, 26336 S.R. 19, Howey-in-the-Hills (unincorporated Lake County) – County resident and Town property owner William Sullivan informed the Town Council of a proposed rezoning by Lake County that would allow R-4 residential development on land situated just across the bridge entering Howey-in-the-Hills. He voiced concern that the new zoning would permit narrow, 50-foot-wide lots with minimal setbacks, significantly altering the visual and environmental character of the Town’s entrance and affecting the adjacent lakefront. He further noted that the County’s staff report indicated the Town had “no comment” on the proposal, prompting him to raise the matter directly with the Council. Mr. Sullivan emphasized the potential long-term consequences of inaction, including a visually dense “tunnel effect” at the Town’s gateway. He referenced condemnation history at Cypress Point to clarify that existing dense development in the area was not by original design.

Councilor Miles responded by supporting Mr. Sullivan’s concerns and advocating for the annexation of the parcels in question, which, he stated, qualify as enclaves. Councilor Miles explained recent changes to state law that complicate involuntary annexation but expressed that the Town should begin exploring annexation options, whether through owner petition or county agreement, to exert land use control and ensure appropriate development standards. Councilor Miles emphasized that Town-led utility extensions could reduce the cost barriers to annexation, and that the Town has already required developers near the subject area to size infrastructure to serve future annexation zones.

Mr. Sullivan confirmed that he owns one of the nearby properties and had previously looked into annexation but found it cost-prohibitive due to utility issues. Town Manager, Sean O’Keefe, clarified that Mr. Sullivan’s property is not currently contiguous to the Town boundary, but noted that broader infrastructure expansion could reduce that obstacle. The discussion revealed that water lines are already being extended to nearby developments, and Councilor Miles suggested staff examine the feasibility of annexing both enclave areas for future Council discussion.

The conversation then shifted briefly to a procedural issue: Council members questioned how the Town came to have “no comment” on the rezoning. Mr. O’Keefe clarified that the matter had been routed to the Town’s legal counsel and planner, but no formal objection had been raised, though the issue had not been elevated to the Council level. Councilors expressed concern regarding that oversight and discussed improving awareness of such communications in the future.

Finally, Councilor Miles requested a formal discussion on the annexation issue be added to the agenda for the first Council meeting in June. Mr. O’Keefe added that the Town is currently working with the County to draft revisions to the Town’s Interlocal Service Boundary Agreement (ISBA), which may offer a path forward for non-contiguous voluntary annexation, important for areas like Cedar Creek and Drake Point, where geographic barriers prevent direct contiguity.

Jerry Baliukas, 26407 Savage Circle, Howey-in-the-Hills (unincorporated Lake County) – County resident and Cypress Point homeowner, Mr. Jerry Baliukas, addressed the Town Council to voice his opposition to the proposed Lake County rezoning that would permit 49 homes on a 16-acre parcel near the bridge into Howey-in-the-Hills. Speaking as the vice president of the Cypress Point Homeowners Association, Mr. Baliukas emphasized the adverse effects the proposed high-density development would have on traffic congestion at the already-burdened intersection near Savage Circle, where residents often wait extended periods to exit the neighborhood. He stressed the incompatibility of the proposed zoning with the existing character of Cypress Point, whose 19 residents have worked hard to maintain a well-kept, low-density community.

Mayor Pro Tem Everline expressed agreement with Mr. Baliukas' concerns, while Councilor Miles reiterated his longstanding interest in exploring annexation of the enclave areas to provide greater Town oversight over adjacent development. Councilor Miles asked Mr. Baliukas about his community's openness to annexation, acknowledging concerns over higher millage rates but pointing to benefits such as police, water, and wastewater service from the Town. Mr. Baliukas replied that annexation had only come up twice at HOA meetings, once negatively, and once more neutrally, and that many of the original residents had moved away, making it difficult to gauge current sentiment.

Councilor Miles went on to explain the Town's more restrictive land use regulations, including recent changes to require larger lot sizes in new developments. He noted that adjacent properties, including the undeveloped Thompson Grove property, fell within the Town limits and were subject to these stricter standards, which have already discouraged developers seeking smaller lots. Mr. Baliukas added that the proposed rezoning extends down to the lakefront, which further heightened community concern.

A discussion followed about the timing of the County Planning and Zoning Board hearing, scheduled for June 4, and the need for the Town to submit formal opposition. Council members expressed a desire for the Town to prepare a statement or position against the rezoning, citing incompatibility with surrounding land uses, overburdened infrastructure, and the importance of protecting the Town's rural gateway character.

Councilor Lannamañ questioned the feasibility of fitting 49 homes on 16.6 acres, while Councilors Miles and Arnold raised concerns about density escalation in transitional areas. Councilor Arnold emphasized the broader issue of preserving rural land in Lake County, suggesting the Town should advocate for maintaining agricultural zoning in such areas.

The Council concluded with consensus on opposing the County's proposed rezoning and expressed interest in revisiting annexation strategies to ensure compatible development on lands near the Town's border. The Town Council reached consensus on the importance of formally voicing opposition to the development. Mayor Wells emphasized the need for the Town's position to be heard by the County's Planning and Zoning Board and suggested that either a Council member or staff representative attend the June 4th meeting. Councilor Miles volunteered to attend and proposed that multiple Council members be present in their individual capacities. Mr. O'Keefe committed to preparing a written statement of opposition. This letter would be submitted in advance to the County and distributed digitally to the Town Council for reference.

CONSENT AGENDA

Routine items are placed on the Consent Agenda to expedite the meeting. If Town Council/Staff wish to discuss any item, the procedure is as follows: (1) Pull the item(s) from the Consent Agenda; (2) Vote on the remaining item(s); and (3) Discuss each pulled item and vote.

1. The approval of the minutes and ratification and confirmation of all Town Council actions at the May 12, 2025, Town Council Meeting.

**Motion made by Councilor Lannamañ to approve the Consent Agenda; seconded by Councilor Arnold.
Motion approved unanimously by voice vote.**

Voting

Yea: Mayor Pro Tem Everline, Councilor Arnold, Councilor Lannamañ, Councilor Miles, Mayor Wells

Nay: None

NEW BUSINESS

(AGENDA ITEM #4 MOVED TO APPEAR DIRECTLY AFTER THE CONSENT AGENDA DURING THE AGENDA APPROVAL PORTION OF THE MEETING)

4. Consideration and Approval: Library Board Member Selection

The Town Council considered two applicants, Mr. Gavin Scheel and Mrs. Tara Hall, for a vacancy on the Library Board following the departure of Mrs. Gwendolyn McIlvaine. Town Manager, Sean O’Keefe, explained that both applicants were residents of the Town and that the staff made no specific recommendation, instead encouraging the Council to evaluate the applicants’ qualifications and potential contributions.

Mr. Scheel, a 19-year-old Town resident and library volunteer, expressed his interest in gaining experience and helping promote library events to residents who may not use social media or visit the building regularly. Mayor Pro Tem Everline praised Mr. Scheel’s character, civic involvement, and familiarity with library operations, stating his belief that such opportunities help young adults grow into future community leaders. Other council members acknowledged Mr. Scheel’s enthusiasm and engagement but also noted his limited experience.

Mrs. Hall, the Town’s recently retired Library Director, highlighted her extensive experience and her current service on the Lake County Library Advisory Board. She expressed interest in contributing to program development and improving public outreach. Council members recognized her substantial qualifications and longstanding involvement with the Town’s library system.

Discussion ensued regarding how to support both candidates, including the possibility of appointing Mr. Scheel as a non-voting intern or mentee. Councilor Lannamañ asked Mrs. Hall whether she would be willing to mentor Mr. Scheel, to which she agreed.

Motion made by Councilor Miles to appoint Gavin Scheel to the open Library Board seat; seconded by Mayor Pro Tem Everline. Motion failed by roll call vote.

Voting

Yea: Mayor Pro Tem Everline, Councilor Miles

Nay: Councilor Arnold, Councilor Lannamañ, Mayor Wells

Motion made by Councilor Lannamañ to appoint Tara Hall to the open Library Board seat; seconded by Councilor Arnold. Motion approved by roll call vote.

Voting

Yea: Councilor Arnold, Councilor Lannamañ, Councilor Miles, Mayor Wells

Nay: Mayor Pro Tem Everline

Mayor Wells and several council members took time to commend Mr. Scheel for his application, encouraging him to remain involved and pursue future leadership opportunities within the Town. Mrs. Hall was officially appointed to the Library Board, and the Council expressed appreciation to both candidates for their willingness to serve.

PUBLIC HEARING

2. Consideration and Approval: (Second Reading) Ordinance 2025-001 - CIP Amendment

Town Manager, Sean O’Keefe, outlined minor corrections and clarifications since the first reading, including proper categorization of funding sources for the finger piers (corrected to General Fund) and the boat ramp dock replacement (corrected to Infrastructure Fund). He also clarified language related to

library impact fees and confirmed that costs related to Water Treatment Plant #3, including a 12-inch pipeline, were fully incorporated into the estimated \$10.25 million project cost.

Councilor Miles raised objections to the reallocation of road improvement funds, specifically the reduction of FY26 funding for road reconstruction from \$215,000 to \$150,000, and the omission of the previously budgeted E. Holly St. project from the current year's CIP. Councilor Miles argued that transportation and infrastructure funds had been mishandled, expenditures were moved into the newly created transportation fund, but corresponding revenues were not, resulting in an artificial shortfall. Councilor Miles called for the reinstatement of the E. Holly St. project in the FY24-25 plan and proposed funding three major projects (Road Repair Program, the boat ramp dock replacement, and all finger piers) through a five-year revenue bond to capitalize on economies of scale and address long-standing infrastructure neglect.

Mayor Wells and Councilor Lannamañ countered that, while road repairs were important, financial prudence was also necessary. Mayor Wells noted the Town had increased CIP spending overall and emphasized the need to prioritize safety repairs to the Town's deteriorating dock. Councilor Lannamañ acknowledged the validity of Councilor Miles's concerns but advocated for proceeding with the CIP as presented and revisiting the specific funding for E. Holly St. during upcoming budget discussions.

After extended debate, Councilor Lannamañ moved to approve the CIP ordinance as presented at the second reading, with Councilor Miles seconding the motion under the understanding that funding for Gardenia St. and E Holly St. would be reconsidered in future budget discussions.

Motion made by Councilor Lannamañ to approve Ordinance 2025-001; seconded by Councilor Miles. Motion approved unanimously by roll call vote.

Voting

Yea: Mayor Pro Tem Everline, Councilor Arnold, Councilor Lannamañ, Councilor Miles, Mayor Wells
Nay: None

The Council also agreed that mid-year budget amendments would provide a mechanism to adjust funding allocations for specific capital projects as needed.

Before concluding the item, Public Services Director, Morgan Cates, distributed additional budget preparation materials and received commendation from the Council for his contributions to project implementation and infrastructure oversight.

OLD BUSINESS

3. Consideration and Approval: SRO Agreement FY 25-26

The Town Council held an extended and in-depth discussion regarding the proposed renewal of the School Resource Officer (SRO) agreement with the Lake County School Board for fiscal year 2025-2026. The Town Manager, Mr. Sean O'Keefe, presented numerous supporting documents including financial analyses, correspondence, and memos from Town staff, which illustrated a range of projected costs and varying conclusions regarding the extent to which the Town was subsidizing the program. Estimates of the Town's subsidization ranged from \$22,000 to over \$100,000, depending on the methodology and assumptions used.

Councilor Miles distributed his own analysis and voiced support for continuing the contract, citing both the public safety benefits and strategic value of maintaining a 10-officer department in anticipation of future Town growth. Councilor Miles moved to approve the agreement as written. Mayor Pro Tem Everline seconded the motion and recommended staff continue discussions with school officials to seek

additional cost sharing. Both emphasized the operational and strategic advantages of retaining the three SROs.

Mayor Wells, while praising the police department and acknowledging the importance of school safety, argued against contract renewal. Mayor Wells emphasized fiscal responsibility and advocated reallocating funds currently used to subsidize the SROs to improve officer salaries and reduce turnover. Mayor Wells noted that the majority of students at the three schools served by the Town's SROs reside outside the Town limits, and that the Sheriff's Office or other agencies would still fulfill the statutory requirement for school security if the Town opted out. Mayor Wells pointed to consistent officer attrition, the lack of long-term benefit to the Town from having SROs unavailable for community policing 10 months out of the year, and stated that the opportunity to shift funding could help address retention more effectively.

Police Chief, Rick Thomas, spoke in favor of retaining the SRO program and addressed several misconceptions. Chief Thomas clarified that SRO assignments are voluntary, and the contract allows their withdrawal in emergencies. He also warned that downsizing the department could jeopardize future grant opportunities and increase pension costs per officer. Chief Thomas stressed that officer retention challenges were real and worsening but maintained that removing programs like the SRO contract was not a guaranteed solution to the problem.

Mayor Wells opened Public Comment for this item only.

Diana Ballou, 1005 N. Tangerine Ave. - Resident Diana Ballou delivered a prepared statement expressing strong opposition to the proposed removal of SRO funding from local schools. Drawing on her background as a retired teacher, she underscored the critical safety role that SROs play, referencing national tragedies such as Sandy Hook and Columbine to highlight the potential risks of reducing on-campus law enforcement presence. She emphasized that the familiarity and trust built between SROs and students are vital, especially in times of crisis. Mrs. Ballou asserted that protecting students should remain a top priority, regardless of how many reside within the Town limits. Additionally, she voiced her opposition to transitioning to the Florida Retirement System (FRS), citing concerns about the financial burden it could place on taxpayers amid already high living costs.

In response, Mayor Wells acknowledged the importance of school safety, and the emotional bonds formed between SROs and students. However, he reiterated that, under state law, security coverage would remain in place even if the Town opted not to renew its SRO contract, likely being filled by the Lake County Sheriff's Office. He noted that staff turnover was an unavoidable reality, pointing to the recent departure of an SRO to a neighboring municipality for higher pay. Mayor Wells concluded that such transitions inherently disrupt established bonds regardless of which agency provides the officers, and he stressed that student safety would still be ensured.

Ann Griffin, 215 E. Laurel Ave. - Resident Ann Griffin voiced her agreement with the earlier remarks made by Mrs. Diana Ballou, stating her support for maintaining School Resource Officers in local schools and expressing opposition to enrolling the Town in the Florida Retirement System (FRS). She noted that the FRS had already been considered and rejected twice in prior discussions and did not believe it was necessary.

Mayor Wells responded by clarifying that FRS enrollment was not an active proposal on the table but rather a topic he wished to revisit in the future as part of broader evaluations, including healthcare costs. He emphasized that any such review would consider the needs of all Town staff, not just specific departments.

Councilor Miles further elaborated on the FRS issue, explaining that, while it provides expanded opportunities for employee mobility, it could also make it easier for existing staff to leave for other agencies. He highlighted the high cost associated with FRS participation, noting the current high-risk

contribution rate exceeds 34% of salary, significantly higher than the Town's current pension program under Chapter 185. He acknowledged past Council decisions to forgo FRS due to its financial impact, while leaving open the possibility of future discussion.

Mayor Wells concluded by reiterating that the central issue under consideration was the renewal of the SRO contract for the upcoming fiscal year, and not the broader question of FRS participation.

Tom Ballou, 1005 N. Tangerine Ave. – Resident Tom Ballou expressed his appreciation for the Town's efforts to be fiscally responsible but cautioned against the assumption that removing the SROs would result in meaningful savings. He pointed out that, if the Town withdrew from the agreement, the Lake County Sheriff's Office would likely assume the responsibility, potentially at a higher cost, which would ultimately be borne by taxpayers through county taxes. Mr. Ballou emphasized that, while he dislikes tax increases as much as anyone, he believes strongly in funding essential services such as fire and police protection, particularly when it comes to ensuring the safety of schoolchildren. He concluded by reaffirming his support for maintaining the Town's SRO program.

Joshua Husemann, 671 Avila Pl. – Resident Joshua Husemann, an employee with Lake County Virtual School, shared insights into the financial challenges currently facing the Lake County School District. He explained that, despite population growth in the region, the school system is projecting the loss of 1,500 students and a resulting \$35 million budget deficit over the next two years. Mr. Husemann detailed how these cuts are already affecting staffing levels, including his own department, which is being reduced from 26 to 12 teachers.

He cautioned the Town Council against withdrawing from the School Resource Officer (SRO) agreement at a time when the school system is under severe financial pressure. He acknowledged that, while the Guardian program or other arrangements would ensure continued security presence in the schools, the district is unlikely to absorb additional costs if Howey withdraws. Mr. Husemann suggested that even approaching the district to negotiate could be ineffective, given the broader efforts underway to reduce expenditures. He urged the Council to carefully consider the wider context before making a decision that might shift costs without yielding meaningful savings.

Andi Everline, 1012 N. Lakeshore Blvd. – Resident Andi Everline spoke in strong support of retaining the Town's SROs. A retired teacher, Mrs. Everline emphasized the critical importance of consistency in the lives of children, particularly those who may lack stable support at home. She praised fellow resident Diana Ballou's earlier remarks and aligned herself with the sentiments expressed by Mr. Tom Ballou regarding the value of school safety and the legitimacy of using tax dollars for this purpose.

Mrs. Everline rejected the notion that the number of Howey-in-the-Hills students enrolled at the schools should influence the decision, asserting that it was morally inappropriate to frame public safety in such narrow terms. She drew a parallel to other public services, such as the library, which serve children from surrounding areas without discrimination. Concluding her remarks, she expressed full confidence in the Police Chief's judgment and advocated for continued support of the SRO program.

Mayor Wells closed Public Comment for this item.

As the meeting approached the two-and-a-half-hour mark, Mayor Wells requested a motion to extend the session to allow continued discussion. Councilor Miles inquired about the proposed extension time, and it was clarified that the rules of order prescribe a standard meeting length of two and a half hours, concluding at 8:30 p.m. Mayor Pro Tem Everline moved to extend the meeting until 9:10 p.m., with the option to extend further if needed. Mayor Wells seconded the motion, and it was approved by unanimous voice vote.

Councilor Arnold used the discussion surrounding the School Resource Officer (SRO) contract as an opportunity to introduce a broader and more strategic topic: determining the appropriate force structure

for the Howey-in-the-Hills Police Department. He suggested that the Town should evaluate how many officers are truly needed, what roles they should fulfill, and whether some positions could be staffed on a reserve or part-time basis, similar to military or larger law enforcement agency models such as those used by Orange County. Councilor Arnold encouraged engaging the police department fully in this analysis and learning from the practices of other jurisdictions, particularly in light of the Town's projected growth. He advocated for future discussions, especially during the upcoming budget cycle, to define the optimal size and structure of the police force.

The Council agreed that broader discussions regarding police force structure, staffing levels, and compensation strategies would continue as part of the upcoming budget process.

Motion made by Councilor Miles to approve the SRO Agreement FY25-26; seconded by Mayor Pro Tem Everline. Motion approved by roll call vote.

Voting

Yea: Mayor Pro Tem Everline, Councilor Arnold, Councilor Lannamañ, Councilor Miles

Nay: Mayor Wells

NEW BUSINESS

4. Consideration and Approval: **Library Board Member Selection**

(AGENDA ITEM #4 MOVED TO APPEAR DIRECTLY AFTER THE CONSENT AGENDA DURING THE AGENDA APPROVAL PORTION OF THE MEETING)

5. Consideration and Approval: **T-Mobile Lease Extension Request**

Motion made by Councilor Miles to approve the T-Mobile Lease Extension Agreement; seconded by Mayor Pro Tem Everline. Motion approved unanimously by roll call vote.

Voting

Yea: Mayor Pro Tem Everline, Councilor Arnold, Councilor Lannamañ, Councilor Miles, Mayor Wells

Nay: None

6. Consideration and Approval: **Resolution 2025-008 - Town's Electronic Sign Usage**

Motion made by Councilor Miles to table this item to the next Town Council meeting; seconded by Councilor Lannamañ. Motion approved unanimously by voice vote.

Voting

Yea: Mayor Pro Tem Everline, Councilor Arnold, Councilor Lannamañ, Councilor Miles, Mayor Wells

Nay: None

DEPARTMENT REPORTS

7. Town Manager

Town Manager, Sean O'Keefe, informed the Council that the Town had just received a proposal related to impact fees shortly before the meeting and that this item would be addressed in the near future. He also provided an update on the Request for Proposals (RFP) for the new water treatment plant, noting that the extensive 610-page document was nearly complete, with only ten clarification items remaining before it could be finalized and posted publicly. The intention is to release the RFP during the month of June.

In response, Councilor Miles inquired about the original target date for posting the RFP, recalling it was initially scheduled for April 1st or shortly thereafter. Mr. O’Keefe confirmed that the original deadline was April 30th, placing the current timeline approximately two to three months behind schedule.

COUNCIL MEMBER COMMENT

8. Mayor Pro Tem Everline

None

9. Councilor Arnold

None

10. Councilor Miles

Councilor Miles asked about when Woodard and Curran would be making a presentation before the Town Council. Mr. O’Keefe stated that they would come before Town Council during the first meeting in June.

11. Councilor Lannamañ

Councilor René Lannamañ began her remarks by commending Town staff for their work on a recent community event, which she described as well-executed and especially welcoming to families and children. She acknowledged that some attendees had criticized the event for being overly focused on youth activities but countered that children and families are essential to the Town’s growth and vitality. She praised the event as the best one yet and thanked staff for their efforts.

Councilor Lannamañ then raised concerns about the performance of GFL, the Town’s waste collection service provider. She requested a copy of the current contract for review, citing ongoing issues with inconsistent pickup times and missed collections. She expressed frustration that, following a holiday, the service did not resume promptly, leaving residents with delayed trash removal. In response, Mayor Wells noted that the prior Monday had been a holiday, and Councilor Miles clarified that the GFL contract does not require next-day pickup in such cases. Councilor Arnold confirmed that the observed schedule aligns with standard practice for major Monday holidays. Councilor Lannamañ, reflecting on her ongoing adjustment to Florida’s systems, acknowledged the differences from her previous experiences in New York.


12. Mayor Wells

Mayor Wells concluded the meeting with a brief update, reminding the Council that updated budget documents (pie charts) had been distributed following a request from a previous meeting. These documents now included both the actual budgeted figures and corresponding percentages for revenues and expenditures, in response to a Council member’s earlier suggestion.

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business to discuss, a motion was made by Councilor Miles to adjourn the meeting; Councilor Lannamañ seconded the motion. Motion was approved unanimously by voice vote.

The Meeting adjourned at 9:15 p.m. | Attendees: 47



Graham Wells, CMC, Mayor

ATTEST:



John Brock, Town Clerk

