

**CITY OF WILMINGTON  
SPECIAL CITY COUNCIL MEETING MINUTES  
MONDAY, FEBRUARY 9, 2026**

The Council of the City of Wilmington met for a Special Meeting on the above date at 8:30 a.m. at City Hall, Skyline Center, 929 North Front Street, Wilmington, North Carolina, for Council Orientation.

Mayor Saffo did a roll call.

Those present were: Mayor Bill Saffo, presiding; Councilmembers Salette Andrews, J.C. Lyle, Cassidy Santaguida, and Chakema Clinton-Quintana; City Clerk Penelope Spicer-Sidbury; City Attorney Meredith Everhart; and City Manager Becky Hawke. Mayor Pro-Tem Kevin Spears attended via video conference. Councilmember David Joyner was absent.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Ms. Becky Hawke, City Manager, briefly discussed the operations of the City, going over each department and functional area to deepen the understanding of what, why, and how we do what we do. She stated that the City is currently in a transition amongst departments. She stated that each department was asked to put together the information being presented based on the current departmental structure. However, some of that will change over the coming months.

Ms. Hawke gave Council an overview of the new organization chart for City Departments noting that there are still minor refinements to be made. She provided details of the departments breakdown under each Deputy City Manager, the Chief of Staff, the new Assistant City Manager position, and a breakdown of how some departments will be renamed. Ms. Hawke stated that Staff put a lot of work into the re-organization of departments, and they believe this is the best way for us to be prepared to meet the needs of the organization and community moving forward. She stated that the budget for FY2027 will fully reflect these changes.

Councilmember Chakema Clinton-Quintana inquired as to what the salary ranges for the new positions will be. Ms. Hawke responded that they vary but all of them were graded appropriately and are within budget of what we have right now. She stated that Staff can provide Council specific information on the new position salaries. Ms. Hawke stated that there are seven positions being advertised currently to reflect these changes and the goal is to get those positions filled first.

Mayor Pro-Tem Spears stated that he would have liked to have been a part of the innovative process regarding the re-organization and seen it brought before Council before it was brought to Staff. Ms. Hawke stated that City Managers are tasked with fulfilling the vision of Council and making sure that services are provided to the community the way that they have been approved. She stated that Staff is not asking for approval on this since we are able to stay within our FDE's and our budget.

Mayor Saffo inquired as to some of the more significant changes within the re-structuring. Ms. Hawke responded that asset and property management is pulling a lot of divisions together from other departments, the department of transportation is pulling together parts of engineering, streets, and stormwater. However, other parts of engineering are under design and construction. Parking operations and downtown services dividing is a significant change, and safety and risk management is another notable change. Ms. Hawke stated that the position for Assistant City Manager for Community Excellence is elevating some of the other positions underneath it.

A lengthy question/answer and discussion period was held.

Councilmember Lyle inquired as to what the vision will be for the Deputy City Manager versus the Assistant City Manager regarding function. Ms. Hawke responded that the size of the portfolio, with the Assistant City Manager role being one grade lower than the Deputy City Manager role regarding responsibilities, will still be an equal part of the Executive Management Team. Councilmember Lyle inquired as to advancement opportunities with the higher-level positions being created. Ms. Hawke

responded that there are additional career ladders being created for several people where, right now, there is no upward mobility for them.

Mayor Saffo inquired, with respect to emergency management and resiliency, if there would be thoughtful and thorough decisions made on the front end that will help the City move forward specifically in this area. Ms. Hawke responded and stated that this has been an issue historically and the City has been siloed as an organization. The intention is to break down those walls to promote cross-departmental, cross-organizational decision-making where all parties are sitting at the table. She stated that it will also be important to manage the items procured as best as possible. Mayor Saffo inquired as to whether there was a way to collaborate with Duke Energy to be more sensitive to the way they are trimming trees. Ms. Hawke responded that she does not know if we will ever be successful in getting them to change how they cut them, whether it's Duke Energy or the North Carolina Department of Transportation (NCDOT) as that is not a Wilmington problem. She stated that collaborative communication at the front end when these projects are going to take place is probably the best solution to the issue. Mayor Saffo inquired as to whether there could be a discussion with Mrs. Hardy, the Duke Energy representative. Ms. Hawke responded that we could have a discussion with Mrs. Hardy.

Councilmember Clinton-Quintana inquired as to how the City ensures these new roles stay a part of the organization and if this is something that is temporary or permanent. Ms. Hawke responded that this is here to stay as there have been many conversations and analysis at the executive management level, as well as conversations with department heads. She stated that this has not been something undertaken in over 20 years.

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## **STRATEGIC & FINANCIAL FOUNDATION**

Ms. Laura Mortell, Budget Director, gave Council an overview of what the budget and strategy office is currently. She stated that this office serves as the central hub for strategic planning and financial coordination that connect priorities, financial resources, and ensures that decisions are aligned rather than siloed. She stated that the department translates policy direction into actionable and financially sound plans by providing data driven analysis using trends and various forecasting. Ms. Mortell stated that the department supports Council and the City Manager's office by making informed decisions.

Ms. Mortell stated that the role of the department is to convert Council's policy direction into strategic priorities, into financially balanced national global budgets, and ensure community needs and service expectations are reflected in those funding decisions. She stated that the department helps formulate how a plan is projected under the revenues and expenditure that we have, communicates to our taxpayers the budget so they ensure with transparency what we are doing, meet the statutory requirements, and demonstrate fiscal year responsible and sound financial management practices. Ms. Mortell stated that submissions are required by April 30<sup>th</sup> with the recommended budget presented to Council by June 1<sup>st</sup>, followed by a public hearing ten days later and adopted by Council before July 1. She stated that there are four to five work sessions that Council is brought in on to ensure the budget reflects direction as best as possible with the City Manager's recommendations.

Ms. Mortell stated that budget and strategy have several components including the strategic plan, the business plan, and the individual work plans that all feed up to each other. She stated that one of the tools in strategic planning is the bi-annual community survey in which the results help guide the budget process. Ms. Mortell stated that another component is the Capital Improvement Plan (CIP), which aligns capital investments with the strategic goals, their asset conditions, as well as future growth of the City. She stated that this is done through prioritization based on risk, regulatory needs, and service impact.

Ms. Mortell stated that the annual budget is the most important budget. It creates the financial plan for the year ahead and creates sustainability moving forward. She stated that there are hard decisions that are made but in the end the City is doing what is needed for the community. She stated that every budget is reviewed and confirmed as state law requires the City to have a balanced budget. Ms. Mortell stated

that it all comes together through the strategic plan that essentially establishes those long-term priorities that guide decision making. The Capital Improvement Plan translates those strategic goals into investment and facilities infrastructure as well as long-term assets. She stated that the annual budget then funds day-to-day operations and sets services residents can expect for the coming year.

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## **FINANCE DEPARTMENT**

Ms. Martha Wayne, Finance Director, reported to Council that the mission of the Finance Department is to assist all the services of the City by providing responsive financial management while ensuring stewardship of the City's resources and assets. Ms. Wayne stated that from a stewardship perspective, the Finance Department is always ensuring they stay within the laws and regulations, whether they are local, state, or federal. She stated that the City is required to have an annual independent audit and advised that municipalities are responsible for looking at the needs of their community.

A question/answer and discussion period was held.

Ms. Wayne gave Council a snapshot of the general fund revenue sources and stated that as of June 30, 2025 a majority of our revenues are coming from property and sales tax. She noted that the City is in a strong financial position with solid levels of financial flexibility. She stated that the unassigned fund balance is the place the City can go to for one-time expenditures and this is the place where they like to have flexibility in case of events such as hurricanes. There are also restricted fund balances for various reasons as well. Ms. Wayne stated that the City is currently triple AAA rated in S&P and Moody's.

Ms. Wayne stated that the City's current general fund policy is to maintain between 20-25% of unassigned fund balance to be prepared to respond to disasters. She stated that for all other funds the percentage is 15-20% which correlates to enterprise funds or other funds separate from the general fund. The general fund balance for the unassigned was 25.27% on June 30, 2025. She stated that this fiscal year we have used approximately \$2.0 million of that.

Ms. Wayne stated that another important aspect of financial management is investments. She stated that we want to make sure we maintain our cash on investments on hand to meet our operating needs to have funding for unexpected needs as they may arise. Ms. Wayne stated that our investment policy is something we make sure is diversified by type and that no more than 25% of the total investment portfolio is invested in a single security type with the exception being money market funds, authorized pools by the local government commission and U.S. Treasury.

A lengthy question/answer and discussion period was held.

Ms. Wayne stated that they want to make sure that we can respond to what the needs of the City are, so they like to have capacity on hand. She stated that they typically look for ways to refund debt, and that they are always looking at capacity and ways to build it by timing projects and modeling. She stated that one of the upcoming fundings is a limited obligation bond financing bill that is not to exceed \$75.0 million. However the "not to exceed" is in relation to new borrowing which is \$25.0 million and the other \$50.0 million is where we are refunding debt that we had previously borrowed to be able to save some money. Ms. Wayne stated that with the variable interest rate debt that was associated with the purchase of the Skyline Center, they anticipate having that paid off by the end of this fiscal year.

Ms. Wayne stated that fleet is going to be moving to the finance department due to the large financial component which ties back to debt modeling. She stated that the finance department maintains several models to include the general debt model for the entire City, a storm water model which is solely for the enterprise funds, the convention center model, and the fleet model. She stated that with the fleet model, the fleet manager is working with the department getting a feel for what they need to complete the duties they have. Ms. Wayne stated that fleet is a major asset for the City.

A lengthy question/answer and discussion period was held.

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Council recessed the meeting.

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Council reconvened the meeting with all present as mentioned above.

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### **DEVELOPMENT, INFRASTRUCTURE, AND MOBILITY**

Ms. Linda Painter, Director of Planning and Development Services, gave an overview of what the planning department does. She stated that the department relies heavily on resident input as they create goals and strategies for each plan that they do. Ms. Painter stated that the Cape Fear Region is growing and Brunswick County is the fastest growing county in the state. By 2060, between New Hanover, Brunswick, and Pender counties, there is a projected population of almost 800,000 people.

Ms. Painter stated that the comprehensive plan is really the long-range vision and policy document, an overview that sets vision and goals for what we want to be as we grow. She stated that all the decisions being made at the planning and policy level come down to a very concrete action that Council is taking.

Ms. Painter stated that in terms of implementation, there are two primary ways, through development regulations in our capital improvement program and through small area plans. As an example of a special area plan is the Greater Downtown Area Plan. The process was started about two years ago with the final product in a few months and over 6,000 contacts. The project included two surveys as part of the first two phases of engagement with a more in-depth survey. She stated that some of the things in the survey included things they would want to change. This plan instills five themes that all came from community engagement to include local character, economy, small business, mobility, and resilience with the biggest focus under economy being affordable housing.

Ms. Painter stated that a district master plan will be one of the next steps of implementation for the Greater Downtown Plan. She stated that the City owns a lot of property in the Northern Gateway District and the goal of this project is to create a roadmap for success that identifies what we would like to see and the intensity at which we'd like to see it. She stated that other goals include identifying specific investments for amenities the City can invest in that will help drive people in business and residents to this area, as well as predictability to future developers by identifying the design standards as we set vision and the paths to get there. It will also provide flexibility.

Ms. Painter stated that the next step in implementing a plan is the Land Development Code and explained what that entails to Council. She stated that the Planning Department has three main types of decisions including administrative, legislative, and quasi-judicial. Ms. Painter discussed the re-zoning process and stated that there are two types of re-zoning, general re-zoning which is going from one district to another, and conditional re-zoning which means that any district in our ordinance can be done as a conditional district. She stated that in those cases there will be actual plans brought before Council. Ms. Painter stated that the big difference in terms of process is that with conditional districts there will be a neighborhood meeting that is required before the applicant ever submits their application to the city for that conditional district re-zoning. She stated that both types of re-zoning have hearings before the Planning Commission in which they will make recommendations to Council.

A lengthy question/answer and discussion period was held.

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### **WILMINGTON URBAN AREA METROPOLITAN PLANNING ORGANIZATION (WMPO)**

Mr. Mike Kozlosky, Executive Director, WMPO, stated that federal law requires that any urbanized area of 50,000 or greater create a metropolitan planning organization. He stated that the organization was created in 1973 out of the 1970 Decennial Census. There are twenty MPO's across the state of North Carolina, 400 across the United States and funding comes through federal, state, and local money. He stated that they connect transportation planning for 494 sq. miles, serve a population of about 300,000 people, provide services to seven municipalities, and they have a 13 member Staff that focuses on administration, planning, and engineering. Mr. Kozlosky

stated that the City of Wilmington is the lead planning agency for the MPO and they have a lead planning agency agreement that outlines the responsibilities of both entities. He stated that they have a 13-member board that sets the policy and direction of the organization with Mayor Pro-Tem Spears and Councilmember Cassidy Santaguida representing the City of Wilmington. Councilmember J.C. Lyles serves as an alternate.

Mr. Kozlosky stated that they have a number of federal requirements and responsibilities as they are governed by a 23 U.S. code 134. Some of the requirements are to develop a long-range transportation plan every five years, with a planning horizon a minimum of twenty years, that is required to be fiscal year constrained. He stated that their planning really starts out with their comprehensive transportation plan which is a state requirement that looks 30 years out or more and is not fiscal year constrained. It is a needs-based plan.

Mr. Kozlosky stated that when you look at the Metropolitan Transportation Plan, operated under Cape Fear Navigating Change 2050, it is a 25-year look to the future of transportation, it encompasses six modes of transportation, and is required to be fiscal year constrained. That plan then feeds into the state and MPO's transportation improvement program which is the 10-year program of funded projects in the region.

Mr. Kozlosky stated that in addition to their federal requirements they ensure they go through a certification review at a minimum of four years conducted by the Federal Highway Administration, Federal Transit Administration, and they adopt a Federal Function of Classification System. He stated that is their hierarchy of roads and it's important because it identifies where funds can be spent. He stated that they also conduct other planning activities and gave some examples.

Mr. Kozlosky stated that they complete over 320 traffic counts across our area on an annual basis and over 100 special counts for development planning studies. He stated they also administer and host the transportation management program called Go Coast.

A question/answer and discussion period was held.

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## **ENGINEERING**

Mr. Dave Cowell, City Engineer, spoke to Council and stated that the department's core services are to oversee the design and construction of public infrastructures, whether it's a City capital project or part of a private development project. He stated that they do both in-house staff and consultants, surveying, engineering, and inspection. He stated that the department also regulates work within public right of way.

Mr. Cowell stated that public infrastructures built by the City as a capital project have a useful life of at least five years and a minimum cost of \$50,000. These include streets, public buildings, parks, bridges, trails, riverfront, and storm water projects.

Mr. Cowell stated that the City collaborates with the NCDOT and the WMPO to leverage federal funding, implement regional planning, and improve safety along state roads. He stated that their traffic engineering division operates and maintains the traffic signal system. He noted that the City Traffic Engineer would be happy to schedule a tour of the Traffic Management Center.

Councilmember Santaguida stated that regarding the life cycle of a capital project, one of the things she thinks is missing from the life of the project is on-going maintenance once the project is complete. She inquired as to how the City would look at that. Mr. Dennis LaCaria, Chief of Staff, responded and stated that he agreed that it absolutely must be taken into consideration because it's not just that first cost, it's identifying what the City is obligated to do as we build on an on-going basis a budget for that. He stated the importance of proper budgeting of projects will also be helpful.

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**PUBLIC WORKS**

Mr. Aaron Beckner, Assistant Public Works Director, stated that currently the department is made up of several different divisions to include building and maintenance, recycling and trash service, street maintenance, storm water services, and sustainability, with each having very different needs and responsibilities as well as staffing challenges. He stated that they all have one thing in common which is aging infrastructure and growing service demands.

Mr. Beckner stated that building and maintenance are currently responsible for more than 60 City facilities which cover over a million square feet. He stated that many of the facilities are 30 years old or greater, including Thalian Hall which dates back to 1855. He stated that there are 12 full-time staff which handle everything from plumbing, electrical work, carpentry, and repairs. He stated that the City's utility costs alone were over a million dollars annually.

Mr. Beckner stated that recycling and trash is one of the more visible services for the City. He stated that there are over 32,000 customers served and they operate the downtown blue bag program, pressure wash sidewalks, clean restrooms, and handle litter patrol of CVB. He stated that this division runs on tight schedules, operates heavy equipment, requires a lot of physical labor, and is impacted by severe weather.

Mr. Beckner stated that street maintenance has about 25 employees maintaining over 400 miles of roadway. They are responsible for paving, repairs of brick streets, concrete streets, curbs, ADA ramps, and dirt road maintenance. He stated that the City maintains paving condition index (PCI) data for all City streets which informs our City rehabilitation plan. He stated that the key takeaway is managing the entire asset system over time.

Mr. Beckner stated that stormwater services has about 60 full-time employees that maintain 900 miles of drainage infrastructure serving a wide-variety of different types of things. This work includes street sweeping, major drainage improvement projects, maintaining easement across private property, and protecting water quality as well as the handling of our MPDS requirements which involves quite a bit of public outreach and education.

Mr. Beckner stated that the work of sustainability is based off goals that were previously set and approved by Council, particularly around greenhouse gas reduction and clean energy. They called for a 58% reduction in emissions by 2050 based on a 2007 baseline and electrification of their fleet goals. He stated that this work is supported by the Citizens Advisory Committee and requires close coordination to private departments.

Mr. Beckner stated that one of the ways they are trying to be good stewards of taxpayer dollars is by coordinating in-structure projects wherever possible. He stated they work more closely with outside agencies like CFPUA to align their schedule and gave the 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue project as an example. He stated that some of the before conditions included poor asphalt, missing or non-compliant ADA ramps, sidewalk tripping hazards, aging storm drains, outdated striping pattern, and also CFPUA's water and sewer lines from the 1940's that need to be replaced.

Councilmember Santaguida inquired regarding what programs, aside from recycling, are in place to limit our use in the landfill and are we working with the County to introduce programs to help reduce the amount of trash we're having to put there annually. He responded that, other than recycling, he is not aware of any major programs currently but when the new director begins, there could be good opportunity for discussion.

Mayor Saffo inquired as to whether the City are the only ones doing voluntary recycling. Mr. Beckner responded that the unincorporated areas offer private recycling services.

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Council recessed the meeting for lunch.

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Council reconvened the meeting with all present as mentioned above.

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## **PARKS & RECREATION**

Mrs. Amy Beatty, Director of Parks and Recreation, spoke to Council and stated that this department is one of the ones that will be seeing major transition regarding re-organization. She stated that as the department is right now, they do all the landscaping and mowing in all the public spaces. She stated that they navigate urban forestry management and preservation, maintenance of our urban forest canopy, recreation programming for youth and adults, and manage, maintain, and operate athletic and recreation facilities. She stated that they are the department that intakes all the festivals, parades, events, etc. and they also issue all the filming permits within the City. Mrs. Beatty stated that they manage the amphitheaters at Riverfront Park and Greenfield Park. The City also does all the mowing, vegetative maintenance, and litter control for 89 miles of roadway within the City of Wilmington which also includes the state-owned roads. This is because Council wanted a more frequent rotation of grass-mowing than NCDOT provides. She stated that the Parks and Recreation department maintains 32 miles of vegetative maintenance for all the greenways. She stated that all of the parks, athletics, and irrigation facilities total around 744 acres. Mrs. Beatty stated that the department also maintains the Riverwalk and is a great example of collaboration across several departments, as they hold quarterly meetings.

Mrs. Beatty stated that the department is fortunate to have an arborist and an assistant for their urban forestry management program with certification from the International Society of Arborists. She stated that they manage 40,000 street trees which include nine people. They are the ones who make the decision to take a tree down when it poses a safety hazard. She stated that there is an annual contract for new tree planting. The intent is to plant a tree as close to the area where a tree had to be removed while taking into consideration all the things necessary. She stated that the department is guided by an Urban Forestry Mastery Plan that was adopted in 2023 and one of the things they would like to do is complete an entire tree inventory for the City that will be much more efficient than how work is currently being managed. Mrs. Beatty stated that they have a great collaboration with the Cape Fear Alliance for Trees, a non-profit organization that shares many of the same goals for tree preservation. She stated that they entered a two-year contract last year with the Alliance.

Mrs. Beatty stated that the larger athletic facilities include the nCino Sports Park, Legion Sports Complex, Robert Strange Park in the William Marquis Athletic Complex, Godwin Stadium, and Olsen Park. She stated that there is the MLK Center and Davis Center available from mid-morning into the evening for programs for youth and adults including active adults. She stated that there are specialized recreation centers and the Fit For Fun Center is an interactive parent/child facility for six months to five years old. She stated that Halyburton Park is probably the most popular park in terms of the programs and it also has live animals. Mrs. Beatty stated that the Hannah Block Community Arts Building is outsourced to the Thalian Association but it is a City recreation facility.

Mrs. Beatty stated that there are between 25-30 athletic programs annually, as well as cultural programming that is arts and local history-based programs for veterans. She stated that there are special needs programming to include the Special Olympics. She stated that their annual, private fundraising, largest event is the polar plunge which is coming up in a few weeks. She stated that the municipal golf course turns one-hundred years old this year and that it is a Donald Ross designed course. She stated that it is a popular course averaging around 65,000 rounds per year. Mrs. Beatty stated that another popular nine-hole par 3 golf course is Inland Greens. She stated that the cultural venues include Live Oak Pavilion and Greenfield Lake Amphitheater which have over seventy events annually combined. She stated that Live Nation manages both of these and each received sustainability awards, as well as over a 90% customer satisfaction rating. Mrs. Beatty stated that they also manage the Thalian Hall contract out of the Parks & Recreation department. She added that there are already 90 permit applications submitted for special events for the calendar year like the Azalea Festival and the Wilmington Marathon, as well as, all film permits are processed through the Parks & Recreation Department. Mrs. Beatty stated that not only does the City have its own community engagement programs, they also partner with

non-profits that meet in various locations throughout the City to include organizations like The Voyage Group, Dreams, Cape Fear in Schools, and The First Tee. She stated that all four of these non-profits do not pay to use the facilities as it is a way for the City to give back to the community.

Mrs. Beatty stated that the guiding documents are the blueprints for what they do. In addition to aligning with the City's strategic plan and the departmental business plan, they look at these long-term plans to develop our goals and objectives and it is what drives their budget development. She stated that the department is excited about going through an accreditation process and they are in the beginning stages of that. She stated that this helps to serve as an accountability tool among themselves as a City, but with the public it allows them to be transparent about best management practices.

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## **HOUSING AND NEIGHBORHOOD SERVICES**

Mrs. Rachel Schuler, Director of Housing and Neighborhood Services, stated that housing affordability refers to households paying no more than 30% of their income and it's important to put that into context that no one should be spending more than that despite earning differential.

Mrs. Schuler stated that Housing and Neighborhood Services has two divisions, one is the Community Development and Housing Division which is responsible for a number of programs both in-house, as well as, work with outside agencies. She stated that they have some homeowner initiatives through down payment assistance and a second mortgage program called Home Ownership Pool (HOP). She stated that they have housing counseling and they are the regions only HUD certified housing counseling agency. Therefore, they can help leverage some other dollars for residents through state programs. She stated that they also have the federal grant Healthy Homes Through HUD for minor interventions and their owner-occupied rehabilitation program as well. She stated that there is a program through HUD dollars that can help bring those homes into repair up to minimum housing quality standards. Mrs. Schuler stated that they also do rental reductions on both small and large-scale tax credit projects. She stated that there is also supportive housing production that could be permanent supportive housing for our homeless service providers, as well as some other supportive housing that has been taking place for many different residents.

Mrs. Schuler stated that these are all funded through a variety of resources. Home investment partnership was a small amount this past year of around \$575,000 and the community development block grant was closer to \$900,000, with a total of \$1.5 million in federal dollars. She stated that they also receive program income or revolving loans that come back and are re-invested into other programs, which helps to continue to leverage the dollars invested into the community and into the projects. She stated that they do receive grants, most recently being the healthy homes grant through HUD. She stated, as an example, Starway Project had community development block grants disaster relief dollars that they applied through the state for, through the North Carolina Office of Recovery and Resiliency. It was to help leverage some of our local dollars for larger projects. She stated that as these come up, they keep an eye out as to whether there are programs or grants that will help further Council's priorities through the work they are doing.

Mrs. Schuler stated that the general fund was about \$2.3 million last year which is seeding a lot of the programs discussed as well as administrative and operating costs. She stated that they have been able to preserve or create new housing units totaling about 879, but what is not included in this list are the housing units that were created through the planning density incentive, which has been an additional 212 units.

Mrs. Schuler stated that the other division within Housing and Neighborhood Services is The Neighborhood Services or Code Enforcement. She stated that regarding common agenda items and resident concerns, they have minimum housing code as well as the non-residential structure code. She stated that the current structure is nine zones, potentially ten, so they can focus on more of the core downtown services. She stated that they really use more of a data driven approach regarding the type of cases and the frequency and that's where the zones came into play. She stated

that a lot of other resident concerns are the public nuisances and they work closely with Public Works to ensure those concerns are addressed as best as possible.

Mrs. Schuler explained the process of what happens before an item comes before Council. She stated that the whole goal is that homes are in compliance and that is what they are trying to work towards as best as possible.

A question/answer and discussion period was held.

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## **EMERGENCY SERVICES**

Mr. Craig Harris, Emergency Management and Resiliency Coordinator, gave Council an overview of some of the activities that go into emergency management. He stated that there are three components within emergency management to include the ability to respond to emergencies, the ability to collaborate with other internal and external partners, and the capacity for resilience. He stated that we are most impacted by instances like winter storms and hurricanes, things of that nature that are unplanned. However, the instance of a building explosion like Wilmington experienced, a fire, or active shooter are all things that you don't have the ability to plan for, but they train for. Mr. Harris also stated that events like marathons or the Azalea Festival, as examples, they try to implement action plans. He stated that exercises are a chance to go through the process as if you were in the scenario and are a way to practice implementation in case ever necessary. Mr. Harris stated that they have an incident management team made up of 32 people who act in various roles from planning, logistics, operations, etc. He stated that they try to perform the exercises with partner organizations within the City and that he works very closely with New Hanover County's emergency management team as well. He stated that it's important to already have relationships with these partner organizations before an emergency arises. Mr. Harris stated that when it comes to resiliency, they are looking to identify the needs and opportunities ahead of time. For example, flood mitigation administration has a grant that they applied to that is on hold because it is part of FEMA. He stated that it's a volunteer grant where they identify our highest risk properties based on insurance claims and they give them an opportunity to elevate their homes.

Councilmember Lyle inquired as to whether emergency services is part of the urban forestry master plan. Mr. Harris responded that emergency services is part of it, as well as tree commission.

Mayor Saffo inquired as to how neighbors and citizens in the community are notified regarding potential inclement weather and flooding in areas that are susceptible. Mr. Harris responded that he always thinks they can do better. He stated that there is an alert system that can target a specific area if they know it will be affected by incoming weather.

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## **GOVERNANCE PARTNERSHIPS AND COUNCIL'S SUPPORT**

Ms. Kara Spencer, Director of Legislative and Intergovernmental Affairs, stated that she is her own department, but she also works with Wilmington's contracted lobbyists. Ms. Spencer stated that the reason we have outside lobbyists is because there are laws in the state of North Carolina saying that a City employee cannot use more than 50% of her time engaging and influencing our elected leaders. Ms. Spencer stated that everyone in the room is responsible for promoting the City's legislative agenda because they are goals that benefit everyone and make all our lives better. She stated that they use strategic outreach initiatives and work closely with all our partners, including the league, the North Carolina Metro Mayor's Coalition, the National League of Cities, STING Federal Agencies, New Hanover County, and community organizations that have overlapping interests with our legislative agenda.

Ms. Spencer stated that the legislative agenda was approved by Council on January 20<sup>th</sup> and the City's legislative breakfast is for February 20, 2026 with every elected official planning to be there.

Ms. Spencer stated that advocacy for Wilmington is at the heart of how we get things done. She stated that what they could use from Council is to stay up-to-date on current legislative developments, develop bi-partisan relationships and engage with

legislators and regional leaders in a positive manner, which means separating the people from the problem.

Ms. Spencer stated that there are upcoming opportunities that Council has on the calendar to include the aforementioned legislative breakfast, the National League of Cities Congressional Cities Conference in Washington, DC, the City Vision Conference through North Carolina League of Municipalities in Raleigh, the North Carolina Business and Economic Development Summit in Washington, DC, as well as there being many meetings on the calendar.

Ms. Spencer stated that she appreciates Council's flexibility in consideration of opportunities that may arrive at the last minute in the form of a White House official, as an example, who needs the red-carpet treatment.

Ms. Spencer stated that the City will be working with a group called Carolina Demography, the applied arm of the demography department at UNC Chapel Hill. She stated that this is because the North Carolina League of Municipalities has entered into a quarter million-dollar contract with Carolina Demography and Ms. Spencer and Mayor Saffo have had conversations regarding which data sets would be useful to the City. She stated that by the end of summer they are going to have a user-friendly interface login for whatever purpose may be needed. She stated that the contract indicates the data will be updated monthly.

A brief question/answer and discussion was held.

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Council recessed the meeting.

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Council reconvened the meeting with all present as mentioned above.

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## **CITY CLERK**

Mrs. Penelope Spicer-Sidbury, City Clerk, stated that the organizational chart for the Clerk's office is a deputy and two assistant city clerks, with the new assistant being solidified in the next two to three weeks. She stated that the responsibilities and duties of the Clerk are to work directly with the Mayor and City Council and in harmony with the City Manager and City Attorney. She stated that the responsibilities of the Clerk's office are to handle all meeting notices, transcribe all meeting minutes, any other duties required by law, and anything else Council may need. She stated that she does attend all City Council meetings, along with her deputy to run the voting program. She explained that all resolutions and ordinances must be attested and certified copies made and distributed accordingly. Also, ordinances that require filing must be registered/filed in a timely manner.

Mrs. Spicer-Sidbury stated that oversight of all Boards, Commissions, and Committees is handled by the City Clerk's office and that there are about 32 in total. She stated that it requires keeping up with advertising the meetings, communication between departments, ensuring a staff person is assigned to the different commissions, boards, and committees, managing the code electronically and a hard copy, contracts and deeds for the City, and managing City Clerk's office information on the website.

Mrs. Spicer-Sidbury stated that public records are a huge responsibility of the Clerk's office as we receive, process, maintain, and ensure all the respective departments receive the requests. She stated that an area of improvement is departmental response in that 24-hour timeline of receipt of the request. She stated that citizens are told the records request process may take 2-4 weeks to process depending on Staff workload. Mrs. Spicer-Sidbury stated that we do have a policy on file for public records requests. She stated that the retention schedule is extremely important as well, as it provides guidance and instruction on the process of when you can receive documents, when they can be destroyed, or how long you need to maintain them. She stated that once the records are returned to the Clerk's office, the request is briefly reviewed to verify that what the requestor asked for is in the records. Mrs. Spicer-Sidbury stated that every request is tracked with a number and every few days the City Clerk is provided with a status update memo from the Deputy City Clerk of the requests.

She stated that requests can be completed online electronically which is faster, as they receive a number and the Clerk can then forward the request to the appropriate Staff person/department. She stated that requests can also be made verbally, which is legal. However, they do slow the process down as everything has to be entered manually. She stated that the important thing is that the request gets entered in the system so it can be tracked properly.

Mrs. Spicer-Sidbury stated that the expectations are for her to be effective in her management skills, communication, ensure her team is up to speed and cross-trained in responsibilities, ensure she understands the policies, procedures, and different laws that affect the Clerk's office. Mrs. Spicer-Sidbury added that she is the Staff person for the Commission on African American History and they are extremely busy as they meet once a month unless there is an event taking place, in which case, they may meet 2-3 times a month.

Mrs. Spicer-Sidbury stated that the Clerk's office is the oldest position in public service. She stated that it is a statutory and state requirement, and a vital role for our organization. She stated that the office serves as the hub of public information and documents. She stated that the Clerk's office has completed 882 public records requests as of today, has handled 85 contracts and deeds, 74 visits to the media mailbox, and the hours of meeting minutes are not solidified but are around 126 hours. She stated that the code update is still at 112 because we do that quarterly or when there is a change in the ordinance.

Councilmember Chakema Clinton-Quintana stated that she wanted to give kudos to Mrs. Spicer-Sidbury as they were recently at UNC School of Government listening to other Councilmembers speak in relation to their Clerks. She stated that she thinks we have the best Clerk and that the other Councilwomen (Councilmembers Lyle and Santaguida) would agree.

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## **STRATEGIC PRIORITIES, PROJECTS AND PARTNERSHIPS**

Mr. Dennis LaCaria, Chief of Staff, stated that one of the things he thinks is important to talk about regarding strategic initiatives is rebranding ourselves as One City and being intentional about the work we do. He stated that every time a project was done, we were contributing to the creation of the umbrella under Vision Zero, organizing that formerly, and starting to look at these things strategically rather than individual pieces.

Mr. LaCaria stated that one of the other things to re-frame is economic development. He stated that it should be growth focused whether it's growth for a business, growth for an individual's earning potential, growth relative to an opportunity, or growth relative to how the City conducts itself. He stated that growth in and of itself isn't bad and not necessarily inevitable either, as there are communities that stagnate and are losing people. He stated that when everything we do is to look at the welfare of our residents and community holistically it only improves the outcomes and quality of life. He stated that one of the ways you help address an affordability gap is improving wages for folks in the community by creating new jobs and new opportunities and filling in market sectors and demands. He stated that most importantly is the need to look at how we are deploying our resources as that will absolutely drive outcomes, and partnerships also need to be addressed strategically. Mr. LaCaria stated that one of the supportive partnerships is the endowment which did fund one of the parks. He stated that focusing those asks, and being intentional with those asks, so that we're not diluting the opportunities to secure funding when the opportunities present themselves is something we must think very strategically about.

A question/answer and discussion period was held.

Mr. LaCaria stated that regarding capital planning and execution, it's important to go into the next Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) completely aligned with the other goals, strategies, and priorities of the City. He stated the importance of being completely transparent and participating in engagements, so the community knows before a project starts what's coming along the way.

Mr. LaCaria stated that the City is currently realigning the organization, collaborating internally on the projects that are outstanding, and starting to lay the

groundwork for the future capital plan. He stated that they will be working to connect with the supplier community as one of the things they need is more diverse suppliers to help with projects.

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## **FIRE DEPARTMENT**

Chief Jon Mason, Wilmington Fire Department, stated that because of the support he has historically received from the manager's office, the budget office, and City Council, the Fire Department is privileged enough to be able to provide a high-level of service to the City of Wilmington. He stated that the Fire Department is a three-time accredited organization and an ISO Class 1 organization. He stated that when you look at 30,000 fire departments across the Country, we are in the top 1% as there are only about 124 certified through the Center for Public Safety Excellence that are also ISO Class 1 certified.

Chief Mason stated that they run about 18,000 to 20,000 calls a year with a year-over-year growth of around 5%.

Chief Mason stated that the bulk of what the American Fire Service does is Emergency Management Services (EMS). He stated that only about 52% of our call volume is EMS related as compared to other cities at around 75-80% of their call volume. He stated that 4-6% of what they do is putting water on fires.

Chief Mason stated that they operate with three different divisions to include operations which is the largest division, operational support division which essentially is training, logistics, safety, health, and wellness, and the fire marshal's office which handles building inspections, plan reviews, DRC, permitting, etc. He stated that the operations division is divided into three shifts as it is a 24/7, 365 days a year operation. He stated that they currently have 201 firefighters operating at 17 companies out of 10 divisions. He stated that they received praise from The Center for Public Safety Excellence for our model system and collaboration with New Hanover County Fire. He stated that one of the important things to know is that part of the accreditation process requires them to meet over 250 competencies, 90 are core competencies, many of which are data-driven competencies that we have to show to meet the competency and what we are doing to improve. Chief Mason stated that they have goals they measure on all their responses. Chief Mason gave a rundown of the different stations around town and a breakdown of the benchmark travel time challenges. He stated that one of the items in the strategic plan is the utilization of the Coleman Complex to create and put a unit there to help with what we know is a growing need. Chief Mason stated that there are lots of special operations primarily our hazardous materials team, our national rescue team, and our water rescue and recovery. He stated that two of these teams are hazmat teams and our tactical rescue team are all state teams. He stated that their Regional Response Team Two covers seven counties, all three state ports, and was one of the seven original response teams that was in place in 1996. That service continues to be provided still today.

Chief Mason stated that one of the great things about this restructuring is that we are taking our community risk reduction person out of our department and putting that person in a more strategic position in the City. He stated that this is next-level community risk reduction and has the potential to be a model for the country.

Councilmember Chakema Clinton-Quintana inquired as to whether he was indicating there is need for a new station on the delay calls heat map. Chief Mason responded that there is a need for a new station there. He stated that a squad or engine may help regarding response time but may only be a small part of making this community less vulnerable and ultimately have less need for our services.

Ms. Hawke added that the other piece to that is potential partnerships. As an example, there were old plans to put a station on the UNCW campus and as the population there grows, there is hope to revisit those plans and have financial participation that would minimize impacts as well, to improve service in those areas.

Councilmember Cassidy Santaguida inquired as to whether there was opportunity around the Greenfield Lake area as it's so close to the hospital. Chief Mason responded that area is no man's land for EMS but if they renovated a facility that would allow them to run a unit out there, he would expect EMS to want to be a part of it

and feels confident in saying that. Councilmember Santaguida thanked Chief Mason and the fire department for how they help people on the worst days of their lives. Chief Mason commented that we would not be able to provide the level of support for our citizens if it wasn't for the support of the people sitting at the table.

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## **POLICE DEPARTMENT**

Chief Zuidema, Wilmington Police Department, stated that he is going to put all the information through a lens of a four-month tenure Police Chief in Wilmington even though he's been doing the job, just not here. He stated that the Wilmington Police Department has been a nationally accredited agency since 2011 having just received their 5<sup>th</sup> accreditation through the Commission on Accreditation for Law Enforcement Agencies, Inc. (CALEA). He stated that the department is also a state accredited agency and the CALEA portion of that has about 400 standards we have to meet with review happening annually. He stated that every fourth year they do a full review to see if we maintain our accreditation.

Chief Zuidema stated that our service model has a strong emphasis on community policing which is essentially about building relationships. He stated that community policing is a philosophy that ultimately comes down to how we carry ourselves. He stated that the other part of it is protecting people using data-driven approaches and that there is a very disproportionate group of people responsible for much of the crime in the area. He stated that we want to leverage all those things with technology and law enforcement, and technology has changed significantly over the years. He stated that we have allocated 280 sworn positions, 81 full-time professional staff, 17 part-time Staff, split up over 6 divisions to include uniform patrol, special operations group, criminal investigation, narcotics investigation, technology training and recruiting group, and administrative services. Chief Zuidema stated that the department is about ready to enter a large-scale reorganization period and he will keep Council and Staff notified of any changes that come out of that.

Chief Zuidema stated that the City receives about 150,000 calls per service per year which is data collected over the last five years. He stated that as a result of fewer officers, they don't generate as many officer-initiated calls. Chief Zuidema stated that crime numbers are projecting downward since 2024 in all major categories, except two of them. He stated that year over year can be misleading but he likes to look at the five-year averages and on average numbers are down. He stated that over a five-year period we are trending a little bit up in property crimes.

Chief Zuidema stated that the STING Center is the City's real-time crime center which is almost a 24/7 operation except for a few hours late at night Sunday to Monday where it is not in operation. He stated that they are monitoring cameras, mainly of the downtown area, taking data that they receive from officers, monitoring calls and running information for officers to provide them with real-time information. He stated that they use a lot of Axon products which is the premiere law enforcement technology organization. He stated that they are the producers of body-worn cameras and in-car cameras and the goal is to get every officer in the department body-worn cameras so that if and when they take an officer out of the office and put him or her in a car, they want to make sure everyone has one of those.

Chief Zuidema stated that the department just started some virtual reality training with a use of force simulator that helps officers be put into realistic scenarios to make decisions on whether to use force or not and what type of force to use. He stated that they are moving towards Axon virtual reality training which requires just a headset to do the same thing as the simulator training. He stated that they also use a TASER 10, a less lethal weapon which will allow folks to be taken into custody without having to use a higher level of force. He stated that they use a ShotSpotter, a gun shot detection technology that is throughout different areas of the City but not the entire City. It uses microphones to triangulate where a gun shot comes from and automatically alerts both the 911 Center as well as send an alert to their phones. He stated that it allows them to respond quicker to ensure people are safe and collect evidence before it gets damaged or destroyed. He stated that another aspect to ShotSpotter is Resource Router which uses an algorithm for all calls and data they have and tells them a place and timeframe

where they need to have a lot more time and resources. This is based on historical calls for service data.

Chief Zuidema stated that community engagement is a big part of the job and you will see the department out and about in a lot of different places. He stated that, at the end of the day, he doesn't want any of the community feeling over policed and under protected, which means we want cops in the neighborhoods and building those relationships when nothing is going on. He stated that there are officers assigned to the community engagement team but the expectation is that all officers will be involved in that, which is a part of the department's philosophy.

Chief Zuidema stated that they have a bunch of regional partnerships, including three full-time task force and they work with New Hanover County Sheriff's Office. He stated that they have a great relationship with them and a wonderful relationship with Sheriff McMahon and they do a great job supporting them in a lot of things. He stated that Sable, which was formerly a helicopter, was replaced due to cost factors and replaced by Unmanned Aerial Systems (UAS), commonly referred to as drones. He stated that they are used to help the Police Department be more efficient and one of the things they want to work towards is a drones as first responder program. He stated that drone technology can be strategically used to either expedite or slow down any given scenario. He stated that they have Cape Fear Regional Special Teams which is their bomb squad, a negotiations team, and a SWAT team, with members from different jurisdictions who participate together in that, as well as partnerships with other agencies.

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#### **FINAL REMARKS**

Councilmember Andrews stated that as the only elected official who went through the Council orientation training two years ago, she wanted to thank Staff for the work put in to make sure the three new Councilmembers know how lucky they are to have a Staff that is dedicated to continuous improvement like this Staff.

Ms. Hawke thanked everyone for their time and thanked Staff for putting the orientation together.

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#### **ADJOURNMENT**

There being no further business to discuss, the meeting adjourned.

Respectfully Submitted,

Penelope Spicer-Sidbury, CMC/MMC/NCCMC  
City Clerk

**NOTE: THESE MINUTES ARE NOT A VERBATIM RECORD OF THE PROCEEDINGS, BUT ARE PART OF THE OFFICIAL RECORD.**

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