

**CITY OF WILMINGTON**  
**SPECIAL CITY COUNCIL MEETING MINUTES (PLANNING CONFERENCE)**  
**FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 27, 2026**

The Council of the City of Wilmington held a Special Meeting on the above date at 9:00 a.m. at Halyburton Park, 4099 South 17<sup>th</sup> Street, Wilmington, North Carolina for the 2026 City of Wilmington Planning Conference.

Those present in the room were: Mayor Bill Saffo, presiding; Councilmembers David Joyner, 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.

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**OPENING REMARKS**

Ms. Becky Hawke, City Manager, expressed appreciation for everyone's willingness to put a lot of the information together. She stated that the goal of the next two days is to look for some general direction and Council's input on certain items. She stated that any "to do" items out of the conference will be noted and put in writing back to Council. Ms. Hawke stated that the agenda is meant to be a guide to help keep them on track through the topics listed. She stated that Staff is here for any topics and questions that come up.

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**MAXIMIZING COUNCIL EFFECTIVENESS & OPPORTUNITIES FOR PUBLIC INFORMATION/ENGAGEMENT**

Ms. Hawke stated that under the Council/Manager form of government, the residents elect a City Council and the Council sets the policies and priorities. She stated that the City Manager is appointed by Council to run operations with Staff that execute those operations professionally and legally. She stated that the residents then influence the decisions through the public process.

Ms. Hawke stated that the responsibilities of the manager are set out in the North Carolina General Statute 168,148. She stated that it's to direct and supervise administration and operation of City departments, attend Council meetings and make recommendations, prepare and submit an annual budget for Council and report on finances and City operations as requested or required. She stated that her role also includes making sure the organization is moving forward, as well as manage all personnel in accordance with applicable laws and recommendations. Ms. Hawke stated that she is responsible for submitting and recommending a Capital Program to Council.

Ms. Hawke stated that it is Council's responsibility to set the purpose and vision for the City regarding direction and accomplishments, and this is affirmed through adoption of the strategic plan and adoption of various studies and plans put together as the guiding documents of where we ultimately are trying to get the City. She stated that Staff's role at this level is to really support that vision and purpose and is where duties and responsibilities begin to shift.

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Mrs. Meredith Everhart, City Attorney, stated that as legal counsel her office is to guide by a whole set of guidelines that we must use every day, including the laws we get from the North Carolina General Assembly, our state statutes as well as any local ordinances, and other required transparency laws that apply. She stated that North Carolina is mostly a Dillon's Rule State which means municipalities only possess powers explicitly granted to us by the state. She stated that Home Rule grants municipalities greater autonomy to govern themselves, allowing them to pass laws on local matters not restricted by the state. She stated that there are situations where state law will say one thing and our charter may say something different. She stated that our charter is state law, so when we adopt our charter that is a state law. In terms of legal issues, a more specific law will apply over a more general law so if there is something that we have done different in our charter than in what our state law allows, then we're

going to be allowed to do that. She stated that one of the questions they get a lot is what's the difference between what cities can do versus what counties can do. She stated that things authorized only through the county include public health, public schools, the register of deeds, and social services. Mrs. Everhart stated that some of the services and functions authorized by both cities and counties include public safety, community development, and all different kinds of programs. Whereas only services and functions authorized by a City include cable television and communication services, cemeteries, electric systems, and gas systems. Also, anything street-related will not be found within the county. She stated that it's not that these things don't get done in the county, but that the state handles them. Mrs. Everhart stated that there are certain things Cities cannot do, due to state preemption, like pass a minimum wage, raise the sales tax, charge certain impact fees, legalize marijuana, require our contractors to pay a living wage, implement rent controls, and inquire inclusionary zoning.

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Mrs. Everhart stated that certain things are required by law to have a public hearing to include adoption of any type of regulatory ordinance, approving or denying special use permits, to repair or demolish a dwelling under the new housing code, Sunday closing ordinances, any type of annexation, financial matters, street closures, naming roads or assigning street numbers, as well as for some miscellaneous reasons. She stated that public hearings go through the Clerk's office to be published in the newspaper and there must be a chance for the public to speak.

Councilmember Andrews inquired as to whether Council could allow the public to speak on an item that is not a required public hearing. Mrs. Everhart responded that Council would have to move to waive the rules to allow someone to speak on a matter. She stated that according to their rules of procedure, the public is not supposed to be allowed to speak on items that are up for consideration on that night and an item on that day.

A question/answer and discussion period was held.

Mrs. Everhart stated that in regard to conducting meetings and business in general, the City Manager, City Attorney, and City Clerk are all here to provide primary support and information for City Council members and all three are required to attend Council meetings by charter. She stated that the City Manager sets the meeting agendas including resolutions, ordinances, presentations for Council's consideration, ensuring appropriate Staff are present to be able to address questions, and is also responsible for any follow-up. She stated that the City Clerk provides the Mayor with the detailed agenda for the meeting, keeps minutes of all the meetings including any closed sessions and is responsible for signing up the speakers for the public information portion of the meeting. She stated that the City Attorney must review and approve by charter all resolutions and ordinances, as to form, prior to Council's consideration. Mrs. Everhart stated that she must be present to respond to any legal questions that may arise during the meeting, as well as, draft all the closed session meeting motions and get a copy to the Mayor and Mayor Pro-Tem before the meeting as there are specific stipulations around General Statutes.

Mrs. Everhart stated that Robert's Rules of Order are going to apply to every situation where Council has not approved their own specific statement. She stated that under our charter, Article 3, City Council shall determine its own rules and we have done that. She stated that a summary of the changes that were made in 2023 were done because of a re-write and so we updated the rules to reflect those law changes to include the current legal standards and to also reflect actual City practice. She stated that the rules found in 2010 were not reflective of how we were operating so they were updated to include the current legal standards and to also reflect actual City practice. She stated that what was in the rules in 2010 was not exactly how we were operating daily in our meetings in 2023, therefore, they were amended to reflect what our actual practices were in meetings. She stated that new sections were added for agenda briefings, consent agenda, and public comments because those sections were non-existent in the previous version. She stated that the law changes in that update included the quasi-judicial hearing in the requirements and amendments to voting in person and remote meetings. Mrs. Everhart stated that they also added a new rule that meetings would end at midnight, as well, a new section on public engagement sessions and information on how town hall meetings are laid out, were added.

Mrs. Everhart stated that all our benchmark cities handle remote meetings completely different because state law doesn't give us specific guidance. She stated that the only concrete rule is that you cannot hold a remote meeting for quasi-judicial hearings. She stated that issues do arise with some hybrid meetings if they are voting meetings. She stated that if the person or persons attending remotely were the deciding factor, that would probably not be allowed, and Mrs. Everhart would advise against that.

Mrs. Everhart stated that she is looking for input from Council on how they would like to proceed regarding the rule requiring all Councilmembers to be in person for all regular business meetings and closed sessions, other than a few exceptions. She inquired of Council as to how they would like this rule to be reflective of what they are doing now as it's important to have rules in place that reflect our actual practices. She stated that either we need to start putting this rule in place in Council's Rules of Procedure, or we need to change it to reflect what this Council wants to do moving forward. Mayor Pro-Tem Spears stated that he thinks we should get rid of the whole rule. He stated that the dynamics of this City Council have changed tremendously and some of the members do not have the flexibility to attend an extensive meeting. He stated the flexibility of being remote is important, so Councilmembers don't have to miss a meeting. Councilmember Andrews commented that she agreed with Mayor Pro-Tem Spears and stated that she has been serving on the Council for a little over two years under this rule, and she has never seen a situation where somebody was voting remotely or where it has affected anybody. Councilmember Santaguida also agreed that we should pull back on some of these requirements but would love to see everyone in person for regular Tuesday night meetings or closed sessions. She stated that she thinks it's important to make the distinction between fully remote and hybrid and where those options are. Mayor Pro-Tem Spears stated that he does think we should keep the part of the rule that talks about having to miss a regularly scheduled Council meeting for being more than 50 miles away and the ability to vote. Mrs. Everhart stated that she would take the information and comments and make some modifications to the rule and bring it back to Council. Mayor Pro-Tem Spears stated that he does not think we need to keep the voting piece and is suggesting that it be removed. Mrs. Everhart stated that she believes there are some legal issues around that and it can be discussed separately after she gathers more information.

A question/answer and discussion period was held.

Mrs. Everhart stated that one of the larger changes since 2023 was the non-sectarian invocation which has not changed since 2010. She said that instead of taking it out completely, it was modified to say Wilmington Police Department or Wilmington Fire Department Chaplains, or other clergy listed by the City Manager. She stated that Chaplains are traditionally used in Congress and other legislative bodies, and that City Chaplains are not required to be a particular faith, denomination, or ordained ministers. She added that it is not advisable to have the Mayor pray during the invocation. Ms. Hawke inquired as to whether there was any appetite to move to a moment of silence instead of an invocation. Mrs. Everhart responded that different places do things differently to avoid it being considered a state-sponsored prayer. Ms. Hawke stated that it's not to say the current rule would be problematic if challenged in court, but it is a common lawsuit that can create the appearance of discrimination. Therefore, a lot of communities have moved away from it completely or replaced it with a moment of silence as opposed to a specific invocation. Councilmember Andrews inquired as to what a non-sectarian invocation is as we are setting our intentions to solemnize the proceedings to put our best efforts forward for the citizens. She stated that it's not intended to be a prayer and she's struggled with it coming from Staff or an elected official as it comes dangerously close to the establishment clause. Mrs. Everhart responded that she can send Council both versions from 2010 and 2023 along with current revisions, and request Council feedback.

A lengthy question/answer and discussion period was held.

In response to Council's inquiry, Mrs. Penelope Spicer-Sidbury, City Clerk, stated that the Clerk's office handled the scheduling of the invocation for Council meetings by sending out letters at the beginning of the year to a list of organizations and churches in the community. They were informed that it needed to be a non-sectarian prayer and it was always a very diverse group that signed up for meetings. She noted

that she provides the Mayor a non-sectarian prayer for each meeting in case the person who is scheduled to give invocation does not show.

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Mrs. Everhart stated that the North Carolina Open Meetings Law requires us to give the public the right to notice of and attendance at official meetings for all public bodies. She stated that failure to provide that notice and allow them access can result in court action which does happen on a regular basis by the press. She stated that thankfully to her knowledge we have not been the subject of one. Mrs. Everhart stated that this applies to any elected or appointed Board or Commission with at least two members of Council. She stated that it also applies to any meeting where you take action, hold a hearing, deliberate, or otherwise transact public business. Mrs. Everhart stated that one thing that is discouraged is email discussions among all seven Councilmembers about City business.

A lengthy question/answer and discussion period was held.

Mrs. Everhart stated that one of the exceptions to open meetings are closed sessions, in which, even if you are going to go into closed session, the meeting still must start in open session. She stated that the Mayor is always going to ask for a motion to go into closed session at which time, he will have to state the authorized purpose of the closed session. She stated that the Clerk maintains the minutes and they become public record when the purpose for them has passed. Mrs. Everhart stated that closed sessions are only supposed to be held when they require you to act in the public interest as permitted under those sections to include protecting confidential and privileged information. She stated that only people directly involved in that matter are allowed to be in a closed session. Mrs. Everhart stated that under (a)(3), a closed session may be held to consult with an attorney to protect attorney-client privilege, under (a)(5) to establish or instruct staff or agents on the public body's negotiating position for the acquisition of real property, and under (a)(6) to consider the qualifications, competence, performance, character, fitness, conditions of appointment, or conditions of initial employment, of an individual public officer or employee, or prospective public officer or employee. She stated that other reasons for closed sessions that are not used as much but still include (a)(4) economic development incentives, (a)(7) reports concerning investigations of alleged criminal misconduct, (a)(8) emergency response plans for schools, (a)(9) public safety plans and response to public safety threats and terrorist activity, and (a)(10) to view a recording released pursuant to G.S. 132-1.4A.

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Council recessed the meeting at 10:35 A.M.

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Note: Councilmember David Joyner arrived.

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Council reconvened the meeting at 11:00 A.M. and Mayor Saffo did a roll call. All were present as mentioned above.

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## **PLANNING FOR A BETTER CITY**

Mr. Chance Dunbar, Director of Downtown Parking, spoke to Council and stated that the Convention Center has been very successful over the last fifteen to sixteen years and that includes financially. He stated that the Convention Center was constructed back in 2010 with Council's support and direction at the time with the City's investment of over \$50.0 million into construction. He stated that further investments of \$30.0 million went into River Front Park and Live Oak Bank Pavilion. He stated that as far as development, there has also been a new marina, two new hotels, a thousand plus residential units, new retail, and probably over a thousand parking spaces associated with those residential units.

Mr. Dunbar stated that in 2025, the Convention Center had over 118 total events with 286 event days. He stated that those event days generated approximately 75,000 attendees and 23,000 room nights associated with Convention Center events.

He stated that the Convention Center has a mix of events with convention and conference numbers being up 33% and banquet numbers up 90% from last year.

Mr. Dunbar stated that the City has an expansion feasibility study from HVS, the vendor that consulted with WDI for a previous project. He stated that with our feasibility, the project has been split into two phases of scope. He stated that the first phase is looking at the market and demand, and the second phase is financial analysis and final reporting. He stated that currently they are midway through this process with HVS and so the information provided is just a snapshot with no financial analysis yet. He stated some of the current Convention Center limitations, are that on average the last four to five years, they are losing 81 events annually due to limited ability to hold multiple events at the same time. He stated that another limiting factor is the facility size and availability, and the biggest limiting factor is the Downtown City-wide hotel availability and rates. He stated that current hotel demand is unmet with event attendees having to book rooms out in Brunswick County, down to Carolina Beach, and Wrightsville Beach. He stated that they really want attendees to be as close to the center of the event as possible but right now it's not possible with current hotel inventory. He stated that Wilmington also lacks the luxury upscale hotel brands as well, but there is a 316-room hotel planned.

A question/answer and discussion period was held.

Mr. Dunbar stated that one of the other items in the draft documents was the evaluation of the four potential expansion sites and analysis of each. He stated that some of the variables include site capacity, proximity to current and future lodging, and the ability to add additional lodging. He stated that site B (onsite) ranked the highest graded for developing an expansion plan, and discussed what some of the future development challenges would be.

Mr. Dunbar stated that two of the programs in the draft document goes back and answers some of the questions asked regarding what we are tracking now, what's the goal in the future, why are we expanding, who are we expanding to, and what are we trying to bring to the City of Wilmington. He outlined the specifications for future demand and programming for each.

A question/answer and discussion period was held.

Mr. Dunbar stated that we have draft documents for phase one but Staff still needs to meet with HVS regarding those documents, as well, receive some other documents and final reporting on the initiatives. He stated that once final documents are received there needs to be a deep financial analysis done by Staff to formalize any recommendation before it would go before City Council. Ms. Hawke added that once the final report is received, Staff will be working quickly to get a recommendation to Council. She stated that it is fantastic that the convention center operates in the black and that is not always the case when you look at convention centers across the country. She stated that it will be a balancing act to ensure whatever expansion occurs continues to keep the convention center operating in the black using reasonable market data.

A question/answer and discussion period was held.

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Mr. Dunbar stated that the residential parking permit program is not unique to the City as there are hundreds of programs throughout the country and even worldwide. He stated that they exist to protect residential interest, to separate parking between residential and commercial uses, to protect neighborhoods, reduce congestion, and promote safety around residential areas. He stated that our program first started ten blocks South of the Central Business District (CBD) Historic District in 1996 with the first restrictions being residential permit-only parking from 11pm to 3am seven days a week, stemming from noise-related activity downtown. He stated that in 2003, the City added daytime restrictions from 9am to 6:30pm where people could park for free for an hour or two without a permit. Then there was a gap before the initial residential permit-only parking program resumed. Mr. Dunbar stated that the changes to the program in 2003 were due to numerous factors such as the opening of the Market Street parking deck, expansion of the on-street meter program, and the increase in paid parking near the courthouse, all naturally pushing people outward to the residential zones. He stated that 2023 was the last revision to the program which was 300 South Front Street and they

went from the evening only 11pm to 3am program to a permit-only program 9am to 3am seven days a week.

Mr. Dunbar stated that there are four different programs currently with activation being block by block. He stated that in order to participate streets have to be zoned residential or continuously residential, two-thirds of the property owners have to sign a petition that is submitted to the City, and Staff has to take a 6-7 day occupancy study through the parking contractor to determine if the street is occupied 70% of the time, with 25% of the vehicles being registered to owners outside that immediate area. He stated that if those steps are passed, the next step is that two-thirds of the property owners are sent paper ballots to support activation or deactivation of the program, which then goes to City Council for a final decision regarding implementation.

Mr. Dunbar stated that the City took a deep dive into the last three blocks that were activated and determined that occupancy ranged on average from 73% up to 96% occupancy. He stated that at the time 72% to 78% of the vehicles counted were non-residents. He stated that they looked at the program at the end of the calendar year, took 11,000 vehicle counts over the course of multiple weeks and the numbers have flipped naturally to show that as the program is designed, it's working. He stated that half of these very high-demand streets adjacent to downtown were occupied. He stated that within this ten-block radius, there are approximately 270 to 300 parking spaces.

Mr. Dunbar stated that they would like to begin looking at this resident permit program through a holistic, standardized view. He stated that we need to begin looking at a continuous block requirement on any new petitions and that the first step is to standardize these zones. He stated that the first step would be to make these larger, multi-block zones within the program. He stated that they want standardized signage and to add way-finding signage into the areas, to further direct visitors into a more appropriate area to park. He stated that one of the movements they are recommending with the standardization is a seven-day program for the nine blocks from Monday through Sunday from 9am to 6:30pm, offering a two-hour parking option for non-permit holders but putting a price on these zones. He stated that they want to develop a pricing strategy with the goal of pushing visitors further into downtown by removing the zero-cost barrier. Mr. Dunbar stated that they would also be looking to implement a permit-only option from 6:30pm to 3:00am. He stated that one of the other things they are looking for feedback on is whether we should allow businesses the ability to purchase street parking, as well as the residents, and at what cost. He stated that their recommendation is that they should allow some flexibility to those permanent options with the goal to keep it majority residents with a fair, flexible option for non-residents. He stated that it should be priced accordingly to keep the numbers in that 70-80% range as well.

A lengthy question/answer and discussion period was held.

Councilmember Santaguida inquired as to whether residents are paying fees for their residential permits. Mr. Dunbar responded that there are a few different options to include the annual permit at \$55, two long-term visitor permits at \$100 per year and the ability to purchase per month, ten 48-hour permits at \$10 each.

A lengthy question/answer and discussion period was held.

Councilmember Santaguida stated that she thinks residents would be unhappy to lose their spots to metered parking during the day and inquired as to how to offset and balance that for residents. Mr. Dunbar responded that there are two very distinct sides to this and the goal is to keep spaces open and either we don't do anything right now and it's geared toward resident parking only or we figure out a pricing strategy that pushes people further away from the residential area. It's ultimately a balancing act.

Councilmember Andrews stated that the downtown trolley is an option that is underutilized that could be expanded beyond a seasonal option. She stated that it is something she wants consideration given to when WAVE transit funding comes through.

Councilmember Joyner inquired if we had a uniform system for how a neighborhood gets on to the list and why we have such un-uniformity for street-by-street

requirements. Mr. Dunbar responded that we would be looking to change that. Councilmember Joyner inquired as to whether the petition was written different street-by-street. Mr. Dunbar responded that the petition has been the same and we have allowed block-by-block, but we also have allowed something that hasn't been structured regarding the one or two hour options or the permit-only option. Mr. Dunbar stated that this is a resident-lead program.

A lengthy question/answer and discussion period was held.

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Council recessed the meeting for lunch at 12:27 P.M.

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Council reconvened the meeting at 12:47 P.M. and Mayor Saffo did a roll call. All were present as mentioned above.

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Ms. Sally Thigpen, Assistant Director, Parks and Recreation, stated that there is a team of City arborists and nine crew members responsible for maintaining public property and responding to hundreds of citizen requests every year. She stated that they are also on call every single day for emergency calls for tree-related issues. She stated that the other part of this program is on the development side as they support the technical review committee reviewing plans for compliance for the land development code with regard to tree planting and tree preservation.

Ms. Thigpen stated that the Wilmington Tree Commission is a very active Commission that provides guidance for our programs. She stated that the Alliance for Cape Fear Trees is a very strong partner that we've been involved with for years that has been further strengthened in the last couple of years. She stated that just this past planning season, over 2,500 trees were given away and they planted over 250 trees on our City streets and parks.

Ms. Thigpen stated that our canopy cover analysis is one tool that urban forestry uses to measure and analyze the urban forest. She stated that an initial assessment was done in 2016, then compared to 2020 data, and the analysis was run in 2023 to give us these numbers. She stated that the pre-hurricane data was 48.1% and the 2020 data showed a decrease in canopy cover to 41.4%.

Ms. Thigpen stated that one of our main mechanisms for planting trees is through the tree mitigation fund, which was established by the land development code and is for mitigation requirements related to tree removal. She stated that the fund is to allow for tree planting activities on public land. She stated that street trees are a big investment with big environmental benefits as a payback. Councilmember Santaguida inquired about new trees that are planted and whether we are tracking how well they are doing and how many are making it past the first couple of years. Ms. Thigpen stated that we are not tracking that but it is a place we want to get to and why we focus so much on planting them properly. Councilmember Santaguida inquired as to whether the Alliance for Cape Fear Trees is caring for the trees once they are planted. Ms. Thigpen responded that they are and that a Tree Stewards' Program was developed that is running two programs a year with around 30 volunteers. Councilmember Santaguida inquired as to whether they could help track the survival rates of the trees as well.

A question/answer and discussion period was held.

Ms. Thigpen stated that the urban forestry master plan was adopted in 2023. She stated that the number one recommendation from it was to complete our street inventory as the City does not have a great way to report on this asset. She stated that street trees are critical to our infrastructure and a street tree inventory allows us to measure the data and target the resources into those areas so that we can best serve our citizens. She stated that two of our biggest accomplishments coming out of our master plan development is the agreement with Alliance for Cape Fear Trees and working with Planning and Development. Ms. Thigpen reported on the next steps for implementing the plan and that they were authorized to apply for a North Carolina Forest Service grant which would help with implementation of the plan. Ms. Thigpen stated that they could propose a text change to the land development code to all the

tree mitigation funds to be available to advance the master plan initiatives for the tree inventory.

Ms. Hawke inquired as to the cost of the street tree inventory. Ms. Thigpen responded that they have a few estimates in the \$200,000 to \$300,000 range. Ms. Hawke inquired as to how long that survey would last. Ms. Thigpen responded that they recommend five to seven years, but if we are actively maintaining our database we could go longer.

Councilmember Joyner stated that he is interested in the proposed text change so we can use money from the tree mitigation fund for that.

Mayor Saffo inquired as to whether there is some understanding of the amount of trees on a property when it is being developed. Ms. Linda Painter responded that they have to do a survey of the regulated trees, which is any tree that is four inches in size or greater.

A question/answer and discussion period was held.

Councilmember Lyle inquired as to whether the tree mitigation fund is the only money the City has to work with. Ms. Thigpen responded that it's the main source for contextual tree planting but we do have an operating budget for all the Staff.

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Ms. Linda Painter, Director of Planning & Development, stated that when we look at reduction to the overall tree canopy we know development is part of that. She stated that one of the things they wanted to address is the question of why a tree isn't being saved. She stated that developers are often faced with the challenge of having to decide, based on many different factors, whether to try to save a tree or plant a new tree appropriate for the space it would be going. She stated that as we are looking to grow, we have to balance preservation and growth.

A question/answer and discussion period was held.

Ms. Painter stated that in 2021 the City re-wrote the entire land development code and improving tree protection was a big part that changed. She stated that with the re-write they added specification of trees for Live Oaks, Palm Cypress, and Long-leaf Pines that are 24 inches or larger, and that they cannot be removed without approval from the Board of Adjustment except for general industrial districts. She stated that as a result we've increased those opportunities to save those larger established trees because of those requirements. She stated that mitigation requirements have basically tripled and removal is now on a two for one basis with options for that mitigation. Ms. Painter advised Council what those mitigation requirements are.

Ms. Painter stated that critical root zones are the areas surrounding the tree where we try to protect to ensure the trees survival. She stated that the critical root zone in the land development code was increased to 1.25 feet and the circumference was reduced to 40% to reduce the impact on those trees. She stated that one of the things required today is an existing conditions analysis as part of their pre-technical review submission. She stated that part of the process is doing a better job to work with partners to modify design layout for tree preservation purposes. Ms. Painter stated that if the importance is about saving a tree, we have been given tremendous authority to help save trees. She stated that another important aspect is selecting the right species for the right location so that those trees have a better chance of survival.

Ms. Painter stated that regarding process and timing we are looking at what other communities do, best practices that are out there, and that we want to bring minor amendments before Council in FY2026. She stated that minor amendments would be what they feel comfortable bringing before Council with unintended consequences. She stated that major amendments would be brought before Council in FY2027.

Councilmember Santaguida inquired as to why we changed the critical root zone to 1.25 feet. Ms. Thigpen responded that the critical root zone was established as the recommendation of the International Society of Arboriculture (ISA) and is common among peer organizations.

Councilmember Joyner inquired as to whether tree bonding is common among other communities and if it is a growing trend. Ms. Hawke responded that some of the issues are that they don't want to tie up capital so that is some of the resistance to putting the money in a bond. She stated that one thing to think about as we move forward with adjustments is that if certain things are implemented like memo tree-saving percentages on properties, there may be a trade off in what would actually end up generating fines for approval because there still needs to be an opportunity to develop the site. Therefore, the funding source used for tree mitigation may actually be smaller. She stated that we would like people to get to the point where there are as many trees being preserved as possible.

A lengthy question/answer and discussion period was held.

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Council recessed the meeting at 1:43 P.M.

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Council reconvened the meeting at 1:56 P.M. and Mayor Saffo did a roll call. All were present as mentioned above (except Councilmember J.C. Lyle who was not present).

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### **COMPREHENSIVE PLAN**

Mr. Travis Henley, Comprehensive Planning and Urban Design Manager, reminded Council that our current Comprehensive Plan is called Create Wilmington and is oriented around seven themes. He stated that according to North Carolina General Statutes, Comprehensive Plans or a long-range land use plan, are required in order to enforce any sort of zoning regulations. He stated that the statute requires that the long-range document be reasonably maintained.

Mr. Henley stated that one of the big improvements to the Create Wilmington Comprehensive Plan is the user-friendliness of the document itself. He stated that one of the things that means is that it ensures the recommendations made are clear not just to Staff and Council but to the developing community, property owners, visitors, or to whoever might be reading the document. He stated that both Charlotte and Greensboro have won for the nation's best Comprehensive Plan in the last five years. He stated that our plan is 450 pages long and just our policies section alone is longer than their entire plans. He stated that one of the areas that needs to be improved upon is the transportation recommendations supporting the rest of the recommendations in the plan. He stated that using public engagement as an educational opportunity that meets folks where they are, where they are already enjoying aspects of the City and capturing information from them there, is a much better approach than what has been previously done.

Mr. Henley stated that regarding the Greater Downtown Plan process, we had over 6,000 residents from the community participate, which supersedes any other feedback the City has received before.

Ms. Painter added that our current annexation document was adopted in 2013 and there is opportunity to revisit it and see if it's still working for us. She stated that our plan doesn't address things outside the corporate limits, so we update the policies as needed for requests for voluntary annexation. She stated that people in the blue area of the map being shown can request annexation, with the one exception being if someone is closer to another municipality than they are to Wilmington, an agreement between those two municipalities regarding the annexation must be met. Ms. Painter stated that we may be seeing more frequent requests for annexation than we have in the past.

A lengthy question/answer and discussion period was held.

Ms. Painter stated that we are working with the League of Municipalities who are working with UNC to do a data hub that we hope becomes a living data dictionary so people have easy access to see what is happening in the City. She stated that our demographics don't represent what this City is like everyday and that is true for a lot of central cities. She stated that CAMA is twenty years old and needs to be

updated as it is a foundational layer of where we go. She stated that one of the things is knowing where our areas of vulnerability and sensitivity are. It also serves assisting policy guidance, but the state looks at it as a regulation.

A lengthy question/answer and discussion period was held.

Ms. Painter stated that with each one of these elements the plan is to bring it forward to Council to adopt as an appendix to the pre-existing Comprehensive Plan. She stated that future phases will be growth strategies and policies. She stated that the goal is to do a street-level view of what's important in doing those neighborhood plans and getting into the specifics so that when projects are coming in, there is already an idea of what that neighborhood is looking for.

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Ms. Painter stated that when we talk about the Downtown Northern Gateway district it's really the Skyline Center, the river, Third Street, the Isabel Holmes bridge, and Red Cross. She stated that what we really want to create is a very vibrant place and there is an incredible amount of opportunity moving forward. She stated that trying to create a district that helps us achieve our vision makes it a place that people want to be, but also responds to changing opportunities. She stated that we currently have over 22 acres of vacant land within this district. The City owns 9.4 acres of undeveloped land in that area and almost 2.9 acres of surface parking, all of which is an opportunity for re-development. She stated that we have a lot of civic anchors like the Skyline Center, the Wilson Center, the convention center, Cape Fear Community College, Riverfront Park, and Live Oak amphitheater.

A lengthy question/answer and discussion period was held.

Ms. Painter shared with Council some of the comments made by the community around ideas of what the City should be like during the Greater Downtown process. She stated that there are many strategies and actions that have come out of the Greater Downtown plan that will influence this work. She stated that they include things like local character, economy, small business, and mobility. Ms. Painter stated that in terms of process, the vision has been set for Greater Downtown and now it's about working with Council for strategic direction, working with property owners and community partners in the area, and the project team is going to work on analysis developing the concepts and implementation tools.

A question/answer and discussion period was held.

Ms. Painter stated that one of the partners we want to bring in for the Downtown master plan is The Project for Public Spaces and that their sole focus is placemaking. She stated that we would like to get this started in the Spring depending on how much we have to do as a Staff versus how much we have to bring in.

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Council recessed the meeting at 3:06 P.M.

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Council reconvened the meeting at 3:20 P.M. and Mayor Saffo did a roll call. All were present as mentioned above.

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## **THE CITY'S ROLE IN THE HOUSING ECONOMY**

Mrs. Rachel Schuler, Director of Housing and Neighborhood Services, stated that demand, supply, development costs, and household income may all be factors that are shaping affordable housing. She stated that no one should be spending more than 30% on affordable housing and so this attainable housing is for what is local to our economy.

Mrs. Schuler stated that the Three Stools of Affordability include supply, stability, and subsidy. She stated that in relation to here locally, it's important to talk about the fourth leg, which is system. She stated that system includes looking at wages, workforce development, and coordination of cross systems. She stated that stability can be the preservation of housing, eviction, or foreclosure prevention. She stated that for subsidy we're talking about gap financing, down payment assistance, and supply in the

way that we incentivize. Mrs. Schuler stated that there are solutions for each income bracket when you look at the housing spectrum.

Mrs. Schuler stated that a few ways they support homeowner initiatives is through The Homeownership Pool (HOP) program that partners with local banks to do mortgages, home buyer education, and the community partners loan pool with the North Carolina Housing Finance Agency. She stated that our Staff has three housing counselors as of today to help support people through the programs as we are the only HUD certified housing counselor in the region. She stated that we typically do about eight loans a year and this is all supported through our supportive housing fund that covers Staff and operating expenses to run the programs.

Ms. Painter stated that there are opportunities to further increase housing opportunities across the City. She stated that a few recommendations that came in through the Greater Downtown plan were to support expansion of urban mixed-use zoning and improving access to affordable housing. She stated that a couple recommendations from that are to update zoning to continue to facilitate missing middle-housing and encourage new affordable housing in areas of opportunity.

Councilmember Clinton-Quintana inquired as to whether there are any 65+ plans to put affordable housing options in downtown. Mrs. Schuler responded that typically the way we have operated is, other than the parcels that we've conveyed to non-profits, it's really market-driven. She stated that there are ways that we have supported different sites, like Avenue Flats, where it required deeper subsidy to have it located in an area that's not just a usual place. Mr. LaCaria stated that mixed price point housing is part of the planning process for downtown and then it provides the framework for what would follow. Ms. Painter stated that one of the recommendations coming out of the Greater Downtown plan is to use City-owned properties to advance the goals of the plan as a way of leveraging what we have to help meet the goals.

A question/answer and discussion period was held.

Ms. Painter stated that one of the more processed opportunities if someone is doing a conditional district, they are required to have a site plan, and in most cases, to build elevation. She stated that we do have some exceptions to that especially in regard to affordable housing.

Ms. Painter stated that on the community design side, it's important to update urban design preferences so we are putting it out there to developers and they know what we are looking for in terms of increasing compatibility. She stated that we talk about wanting to protect neighborhoods, so having those strong guidelines that we can give to people becomes important.

A question/answer and discussion period was held.

Ms. Painter stated that the challenge with any density bonus is always going to be, in regard to the things that go along with it in terms of structure parking. She stated that making the numbers work is hard without financial assistance. She stated that a lot of developers don't do affordable housing because it's a lot of administrative work that they are not accustomed to doing.

A question/answer and discussion period was held.

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Mrs. Schuler stated that homeless services is something that we partner with a lot of other agencies and some of the ways we use our CDBG home and general funds is to support homeless services. She stated that our lead agency is the Cape Fear Regional Continuum of Care, housed at the Cape Fear Council of Government (CFCOG), and they are a collaborative group that brings in all the regional partners both from local governments as well as the practicing agencies. Mrs. Schuler stated that she is the City's appointee on the board.

Mrs. Schuler stated that coordinated assessment is considered the best practice where there is one process to get support which helps streamline how rate housing works. She stated that it aligns the resources so that if there are agencies that are over-stressed, it helps balance those opportunities. She stated that the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) is a broad word for the database and is important because when we have good data we can make good decisions.

Councilmember Joyner stated that this allows us to track what services have been provided to someone who is homeless even if they show up in Wilmington from Pender County, as an example. However, our regional database does not transfer to other regional databases. These databases are required by Housing and Urban Development.

A question/answer and discussion period was held.

Mrs. Schuler stated that another best practice is "housing first" which provides that foundation, but is not restricted to housing only. She stated that this helps connect people to their services where they are. She stated that some common models of this are permanent supportive housing with services available on-site or they are being transported to where the services are. Mrs. Schuler stated that rapid re-housing is for a small amount of folks who only need a little bit of intervention. She stated that there are various solutions for the various leads of people.

Mrs. Schuler stated that there are changes coming through and being discussed at the Federal level. She stated that one of the things being discussed in the next round of funding is service dollars specifically through the COC for supportive services only. She stated that they are not looking at supporting the housing but the services, which is a great tool to compliment the work we are doing.

Mrs. Schuler stated that when we talk about the unsheltered, one of the biggest things to keep in mind is short-term solutions to get people potentially off the streets, with the goal being to get people in permanent housing. She stated that any solutions need to be low-barrier, housing focused, and based in best practices.

Mrs. Schuler stated that the focus for their next conversation is geared toward the shelter regarding day and night services to support the community and building up the system at the continuum of care. She stated that we currently have a request for information that is due next week regarding an example of what we are looking for in a partnership to help answer these questions.

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Council recessed the meeting at 4:23 P.M.

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Council reconvened the meeting at 4:45 P.M. and Mayor Saffo did a roll call. All were present as mentioned above.

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## **LOW BARRIER SHELTER STRATEGY**

Mrs. Schuler gave Council an update and explained that a food desert is a geographical area in low-income neighborhoods where access to nutritional, quality food is limited. She stated that this comes into play when we talk about the ecosystem. She stated that when you approach it from a policy standpoint, that's where we look at it from a transportation structure. She stated that how we approach this is also from a zoning and planning perspective. Mr. LaCaria added that the City's goal from a high-level in relation to the policies we set and plans we adopt, is approaching things from a mixed-use development standpoint.

A lengthy question/answer and discussion period was held.

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Note: Mayor Pro-Tem Spears arrived in person at 5:41 P.M.

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Councilmember Joyner stated that what he would like in relation to food deserts is a detailed understanding and timeline on what the northern downtown master planning process is going to look like and how we can incorporate our vision for a grocery store in that area.

Mayor Pro-Tem Spears commented that he thinks the City needs to have a town hall to introduce Ms. Hawke to the community and also get feedback on the topics we're discussing to help assist the direction we need to go.

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## NEW HANOVER COUNTY COMMUNITY ENDOWMENT

Ms. Sophie Dagenais, President & CEO, New Hanover County Community Endowment, gave an overview of the endowment and stated it was a foundation that was established when the New Hanover Regional Medical Center was sold to Novant Health. She stated that their mandate is governed by a suite of governing documents and the endowment is here by the foundation to benefit the residents of New Hanover County. She stated that they do partner with the City sometimes and that they are able to supplement funding but they cannot replace funding. She stated that their mission is to improve the health, education, safety, and economic success of every person in our community. Ms. Dagenais stated that the mission is activated through their Board that is comprised of thirteen members, six of them are appointed by Novant, five are appointed by the county, and two are appointed by the other eleven board members.

Ms. Dagenais stated that their Community Advisory Council had eight new members in 2025, with a total of thirteen members and \$1.7 billion. She stated that most of the stewardship of the assets lies with the Board. She stated that 2025 marked the 5<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the endowment.

Ms. Dagenais stated that the roadmap to where they are going consists of social help, equity, maternal and infant health, mental health, preventive care, education, and community safety. She stated that to drive this forward, a good part of last year was spent on strategy development, to develop a theory of change. Ms. Dagenais stated that the process of developing that theory of change required them to pay attention to the barriers like food, stable housing, and transportation. Therefore, they have made meeting basic needs at the heart of their work.

Ms. Dagenais stated that the grants budget in 2026 is \$58.0 million, with \$24.6 million left to deplete. She stated that entering 2026, they knew they had set aside \$1.0 million for their community grants program with 122 applications under review. She stated that they entered 2026 with a \$2.0 million emergency recovery reserve.

Ms. Dagenais encouraged Council to stay connected to the endowment by means of their newsletter, social media, and their website.

A lengthy question/answer and discussion period was held.

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Council recessed the meeting at 6:06 P.M.

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Council reconvened the meeting at 6:19 P.M.

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## COMMUNITY RESILIENCY AND ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

Mr. Craig Harris, Emergency Management and Resiliency Coordinator, stated that resilience is our capaCity to handle something. He stated that resiliency is not one department but is particularly our stormwater areas, planning, housing, and engineering. He stated that a hazard vulnerability analysis is identifying the things we are exposed to and ranking them by experience at a particular level. He stated that the county, in concert with the state, does this annually dating back to 1954. He stated that it's no surprise some of the things that are the greatest risk for us are hurricanes, floods, tornadoes, thunderstorms, and windy events.

Mr. Harris stated that there is another type of flooding that we're finding that has a greater impact and it is referred to as sunny day flooding, high tide flooding, or king high flooding. He stated that this type of flooding can impact us with a foot or two more of flooding due to higher tides a few times a year. Mr. Harris stated that our flood maps date back to 2014 and they are an expensive and rigorous process to undertake for updating purposes.

Mr. Harris stated that flood gauges are important because of the data we receive but also because the state's mapping and network website that helps impact people, saves lives, and helps our public safety crew. He stated that the Charlotte area, as an example, has a massive network and it is amazing what they have done.

Mr. Harris stated that we have ten parks in the City that are in the flood zone. He stated that they added a gauge to Greenfield Lake and when they know a storm is coming, they will lower the level of the water so it can hold more.

Mr. Harris stated that there are multiple partners that are helping with water quality including Cape Fear River Watch and UNCW. He stated that the City just deployed an allergy tracker and the money given to Cape Fear River Watch is supporting their river clean up and they are done once a month with targeted areas. He stated that the Heal Our Waterways program focuses their attention on Burnt Mill Creek and Hewlett Creek because they are impaired, but the program provides great opportunity for positive impact.

Mr. Harris stated that stormwater upgrades and enhancements is a constant as long as we have growth and aging infrastructure. He stated that the most impactful thing regarding stormwater would be getting a better handle on what we have and identifying the City's risks and vulnerabilities. He stated that the grant assessment is currently in phase two and outreach was started recently with thirteen pop-ups happening. He stated that at the end of the grant in September we will have a resiliency plan to bring to Council to review.

Mr. Harris advised Council that there is an event scheduled for May 16<sup>th</sup> at the Skyline Center to educate our people on how to be better prepared for storms, hurricanes, and high winds, and there will be interactive elements for the community.

A lengthy question/answer and discussion period was held.

Councilmember Joyner inquired as to the current Staff member who is the lead or liaison for the Clean Energy Advisory Committee. Ms. Hawke responded Mr. David Ingram, Sustainability Project Manager, is the Staff person for this Committee. Councilmember Joyner stated that he thinks we need an update from that Committee on how Duke Energy is changing their commitment to creating energy, what their emission standards are, and an update on how that is going to affect the City's clean energy goals. He stated that they just did that review at Cape Fear Public Utility Authority (CFPUA) and it's a big deal. Councilmember Joyner stated that the second piece is the lead transition study and where we are at with that to get it over the finish line.

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## **ADJOURNMENT**

There being no further business to discuss, the meeting adjourned at 7:20 P.M.

Respectfully Submitted,

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