

Galax City Council
Minutes
August 14, 2023

Galax City Council convened in regular session in City Council Chambers on August 14, 2023, at 6:00 p.m.

At 6:00 p.m. Mayor Greene called the meeting to order with the following Council persons present and they are as listed: Mayor Greene, Vice Mayor White, Councilwoman Ritchie, Councilman Haynes, Councilman Larrowe, Councilman Warr, and Councilman Henck.

Mayor Greene gave the opening prayer and led the Pledge of Allegiance.

SPECIAL ACTION

- Mayor Greene congratulated and thanked Officer Vickie A. Taylor (Galax Police Dept./School Resource Officer) on her retirement, 08/08/2001 – 07/31/2023, 21 yrs. 11 mos.
- Not Present - James B. Rector, Engineering Dept.; Retirement, 04/17/2017 – 08/31/2023, 6 yrs. 4 mos.
- Walmart Manager - Todd Taylor, awarded a \$1000 check for the “Shop with a Cop” Program through the Galax Police Dept.
- Gold Award 2022 - Galax Water Treatment Plant, Mike Brown was present to accept the award.
- Mayor Willie Greene introduced and welcomed the new City Manager, Michael D. Burnette. Mr. Burnette’s first day as City Manager will be September 18th.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES

Regular Meeting 7-10-23

- *Councilman Larrowe made the motion to approve the meeting minutes of July 10, 2023, with indicated corrections. Vice Mayor White seconded, and the motion was unanimously approved by the following votes of “yea”: Mayor Greene, Vice Mayor White, Councilman Haynes, Councilwoman Ritchie, Councilman Larrowe, Councilman Warr and Councilman Henck.*

Special Meeting 8-1-23

- *Councilman Larrowe made the motion to approve the joint meeting minutes of August 1, 2023. Councilman Haynes seconded, and the motion was approved by the following votes of “yea”: Mayor Greene, Councilman Haynes, Councilwoman Ritchie, Councilman Larrowe, Councilman Warr and Councilman Henck. Vice Mayor White abstained due to her absence at the meeting.*

OLD BUSINESS

Radio Interoperability Task Force Request

Interim City Manager - Gavin Blevins informed Council that following the recommendation of the Radio Task Force at the August 1st joint meeting of Galax, Carroll and Grayson, the Council determined to add the “ask” to the August 14th agenda. In order to maintain radio system interoperability between the three parties, the Task Force was established to research and recommend a technology that would best provide for the future of the radio system. Mr. Blevins said following a procurement done by Fredrick County, the parties were able to purchase certain technologies and equipment by contract with E.F. Johnson (a JVC Kenwood Company). The parties would have to individually contract equipment, labor, and tower repairs. Mr. Blevins stated that ultimately, in staying with VHF technology currently, with the capability to eventually transition to P25, the recommendation was to purchase Atlas repeaters and licensed microwave. He added our sincerest intention at this point - we are all going to stay with VHF and should have no issues. The planning process was to make sure that we were replacing and implementing a procedure that everyone would remain interoperable for the foreseeable future.

- *Councilman Larrowe made the motion to appropriate \$874,000 in FY2024, in accordance with the City's capital improvement program, to purchase repeaters and licensed microwave, and fund tower repairs and equipment as long as our system is compatible with Grayson and Carroll Counties. Councilman Henck seconded, and the motion was unanimously approved by the following votes of "yea": Mayor Greene, Vice Mayor White, Councilman Haynes, Councilwoman Ritchie, Councilman Larrowe, Councilman Warr and Councilman Henck.*

Gavin Blevins informed Council of the request to approve negotiating a contract with EF Johnson for purchase of Atlas repeaters and potentially licensed microwave, following the Frederick procurement, and to evaluate, make critical tower improvements, and where necessary, purchase fixed station equipment to position the region for a phased approach for implementing a VHF P25 Public Safety Radio System.

- *Councilman Larrowe made the motion to approve the motion as presented. Councilman Henck seconded, and the motion was unanimously approved by the following votes of "yea": Mayor Greene, Vice Mayor White, Councilman Haynes, Councilwoman Ritchie, Councilman Larrowe, Councilman Warr and Councilman Henck.*

NEW BUSINESS

Budget Amendment Request; Regional Library

Gavin Blevins informed Council of a budget request for additional funding to be appropriated to the library. He said Ms. Fore had requested an additional appropriation of \$14,843 to the regional library to cover the City's 6% raise for FY24; when the budget request was originally submitted, the library had not expected the need to request funding to cover the 6% raise (3% was expected). Ms. Fore also requested the other 40% from Carroll County (60:40 split for regional employees). Without the additional appropriation, the library would be depleting funds incorporated into their capital improvements fund for operations in FY24.

- *Councilman Henck made the motion to appropriate \$14,843.00 in additional funds requested for the Regional Library to cover the variance in salaries and benefits requested vs salary increases approved. Councilwoman Ritchie seconded, and the motion was unanimously approved by the following votes of "yea": Mayor Greene, Vice Mayor White, Councilman Haynes, Councilwoman Ritchie, Councilman Larrowe, Councilman Warr and Councilman Henck.*

Library Board Vacancy

Gavin Blevins announced a vacancy on the library board that will need to be filled. Sarah Nielson will be moving out of the City, so the City needs to appoint a replacement to fill the remainder of her term, expiring 06/30/2026. Ms. Nielson last date serving the Board will be September 30th. The consensus from Council was to advertise the vacancy as usual, and notify a recent library board applicant of the vacancy. The vacancy will be appointed at the September meeting.

Eastview Housing Rehabilitation Project

Gavin Blevins informed Council of a request from the Mount Rogers Planning District Commission to adopt the Grievance Procedure and the Fair Housing Certification per DHCD requirements to get under contract and be eligible for grant funding for the Eastview Housing Rehabilitation Project.

- *Councilwoman Ritchie made the motion to adopt the Grievance Procedure as presented. Councilman Warr seconded, and the motion was unanimously approved by the following votes of "yea": Mayor Greene, Vice Mayor White, Councilman Haynes, Councilwoman Ritchie, Councilman Larrowe, Councilman Warr and Councilman Henck.*

- *Councilman Larrowe made the motion to adopt the Fair Housing Certification. Councilman Henck seconded, and the motion was unanimously approved by the following votes of “yea”: Mayor Greene, Vice Mayor White, Councilman Haynes, Councilwoman Ritchie, Councilman Larrowe, Councilman Warr and Councilman Henck.*

Mixed Use on Main

Gavin Blevins informed Council of a request to approve a resolution for grant application for an Industrial Revitalization Fund (IRF) grant with DHCD. He explained this should go through the IDA and be coordinated by the new Main Street Director which has been funded for half of FY2024. He said that only the local government could apply, and there were requirements that would have to be met. Applications will be accepted until December 2023 for this round. Jolena Young, Grants Administrator, discussed further with Councilman Haynes.

- *Councilman Larrowe made the motion to recommend to the IDA to consider applying for the funds to complete this project. Councilman Haynes seconded. Councilman Henck added that in case there were others in the city who would meet the criteria, and be interested in applying, the IDA should have that option to advertise (if they choose too). The motion was unanimously approved by the following votes of “yea”: Mayor Greene, Vice Mayor White, Councilman Haynes, Councilwoman Ritchie, Councilman Larrowe, Councilman Warr and Councilman Henck.*

Galax Development Corp. (GDC); Funding Request

Gavin Blevins asked Councilman Larrowe to give an overview of a request from the Galax Development Corp. (GDC) for \$2,500. Councilman Larrowe’s summary included the role of the GDC as a non-profit which was set up at the direction of the city for the purposes of assisting in economic development opportunities. The funding request would cover operating costs related to the basic administration of the GDC. *Councilman Larrowe made a motion to approve the funding request instead of waiting until the September Council meeting, since Council’s Rules & Procedures were waived in the previous request for funding to the Galax Regional Library. Councilman Warr seconded.* Gavin Blevins clarified that in the Council’s Rules & Procedures adopted by Council in 2010, requests for funding from an external agency would need to be tabled until the following meeting. He said the Regional Library, unlike the GDC, was not an external agency, but a city department which was included in our budget. Councilman Haynes commented that the GDC had not yet received payment from the IDA, and that was the reason for the administrative funding request. A lengthy discussion continued with comments, concerns, and questions from Councilman Henck which included: GDC’s non-profit status, two Council members serving on the GDC which had now changed from its original purpose, Kipling Lane Project should be handled through the IDA, not the GDC, and what our relationship consists of with the GDC. Councilman Larrowe recapped his motion requesting for the Council’s Rules & Procedures be waived so that the \$2500 could be appropriated to the GDC. Councilman Haynes reiterated that the intention of the VDC was to be a game changer for the City of Galax, and to rejuvenate an area that would most likely be torn down, as well as bring vibrancy & life to this area. He said as “partners” with the GDC, Council had previously voted for the IDA to pay funds to the GDC. Councilman Haynes called for the question. Mayor Greene confirmed, then asked for a vote from Council.

- *The motion was approved to approve the \$2500 funding request to the IDA by the following votes of “yea”: Mayor Greene, Vice Mayor White, Councilman Haynes, Councilwoman Ritchie, Councilman Larrowe, and Councilman Warr. Councilman Henck opposed.*

Council’s Rules & Procedures

Gavin Blevins informed Council of a request for minor revisions for Council’s Rules & Procedures which were adopted on December 13, 2010. The revisions were given to Council prior to the meeting for review only at this meeting, and per Section 9.2, cannot be adopted until a following meeting of the City Council. Councilman Larrowe stated that he felt policies and procedures needed to be revised from time to time, but he felt that the proposed revisions for Council’s Rules & Procedures still had additional corrections to be made on them.

- *Councilman Larrowe made the motion that policies/procedures be routed to the Audit & Finance Committee to be evaluated, before coming back to Council for approval. Vice Mayor White seconded.*

The motion was unanimously approved by the following votes of “yea”: Mayor Greene, Vice Mayor White, Councilman Haynes, Councilwoman Ritchie, Councilman Larrowe, Councilman Warr and Councilman Henck.

Community Development Block Grant, Business District Revitalization (Planning Grant)

Gavin Blevins informed Council of a Business District Revitalization (BDR) Planning Grant (\$50,000 available). He explained these grants were intended to assist appropriate localities in undertaking activities that are designed to identify opportunities to improve the economic and physical conditions within the community. The planning grant was intended to determine if there is a sufficient level of physical and / or economic blight present to be eligible for CDBG assistance. Mr. Blevins requested approval to schedule a required public hearing for public comments at the next Council meeting in September in order to apply for the BDR Planning Grant.

- *Councilman Haynes made the motion to approve the public hearing at the September 11 meeting. Councilman Warr seconded. The motion was unanimously approved by the following votes of “yea”: Mayor Greene, Vice Mayor White, Councilman Haynes, Councilwoman Ritchie, Councilman Larrowe, Councilman Warr and Councilman Henck.*

CITIZEN COMMENTS

- Al Dickerson – Concerned about the overall appearance of the City of Galax, and it’s decline over the past two decades. Continued efforts are needed to carry on former City Manager, Barry Moore’s initiatives for improvements. He asked that Bernie Rector; Code Compliance & Zoning Officer, be reinstated to his position.
- Ron Catron – Made suggestions related to the ordinance amendment that Council approved in November 2022, which included being proactive, not micromanaging, assignment of an individual person to carry out enforcement of the code.
- *Councilman Larrowe made the motion to waive the three-minute time limit for speakers. Councilman Haynes seconded. The motion was unanimously approved by the following votes of “yea”: Mayor Greene, Vice Mayor White, Councilman Haynes, Councilwoman Ritchie, Councilman Larrowe, Councilman Warr and Councilman Henck.*
- Shane Coomes – Addressed Council regarding zoning concerns which consisted of multiple vehicles and families in a residential house in his neighborhood.
- Sarah Price – Thanked to Chief Cooper, Building Official, and Bernie Rector for addressing and removing a gambling business in her neighborhood. She asked for help from the city in enforcing the code to clean up her neighborhood to remove immobile vehicles & overgrown lots.
- Delegate Wren Williams – A citizen of Patrick County who was in Galax, who offered to continue to assist Galax with real estate issues and economic development.

COMMUNICATIONS FROM CITY MANAGER, MAYOR, CITY COUNCIL, AND COUNCIL COMMITTEE

Gavin Blevins – City Manager Report

Mr. Blevins gave a July 2023 summary report to City Council which included the following topics: Berkley Group – OSA, Library Budget, Animal Shelter, PAWS Program, Shared Services with Grayson & Carroll Counties, Planning Commission, Rex Theater Lease, Rosenwald Felts Lease, Agreement with Grayson Co.

Commonwealth's Attorney, County Water Sale Agreements, CCSA Lease, Misc. Requests by Council, Vaughan Commons Development, Water Treatment Plant Design, and DSS Renovations.

Councilman Warr

- Suggested assigning issues and problems heard from public comments to a council committee for follow-up and a response back to the complainants. Councilman Henck said it would be referred back to the Public Services Committee.
- Downtown parking issues – Discussed the need four-hour parking on Oldtown Street (from Main Street to Jefferson Street). After a discussion, ***Councilman Warr made a motion to implement four-hour parking again on Oldtown St. as previously mentioned in discussion, and requested management to report back at next Council meeting of action to taken. Councilman Larrowe seconded.*** Councilman Henck inquired about voting on an item not on the agenda. After a discussion with Mayor Greene & City Attorney, Councilman Warr did not want to withdraw his motion. ***The motion was unanimously approved by the following votes of “yea”: Mayor Greene, Vice Mayor White, Councilman Haynes, Councilwoman Ritchie, Councilman Larrowe, Councilman Warr and Councilman Henck.***
- Parking Enforcement Officer – requested a monthly violation report from GPD from the GPD on a monthly basis with details.

Councilwoman Ritchie

- Stories & Strings Festival – Good turnout considering rain

Vice Mayor White

- Convocation at Galax High School – New behavioral health clinic, real time safety technology now in place in case of emergency
- Schedule a council work session for strategic planning and new initiatives

Councilman Haynes

- Proud of witnessing EMS & GPD working so well together on a heart attack victim at Felts Park
- Galax gift box idea discussed to send to potential industries, CEO's, restaurants, etc.

Councilman Larrowe

- “Business Day” - Joint event with Carroll & Grayson Counties planned for 9/15 (industries & manufacturing) and 9/18 (small businesses) at Crossroads. Incorporate introductions or requests for issues feedback for attendees to better understand the needs. Several agencies will be present to provide resource information. The need for transportation and day care needs to be addressed as well.
- Vaughan Factory Restoration – Progress report discussion;
 - Project to be divided into segments – apartments, retail, and commercial
 - Developers and applicable lenders in place for most segments
 - Upcoming meeting to occur
 - National Parks Service approval required/pending
 - Sub-divided property planned
 - Contingent on costs
- Thoughts for Council – An in-depth report given by Councilman Larrowe – attached to the Council meeting minutes.

Mayor Greene

- Shared his recent meetings and activities since the July meeting:
 - Tourism & Downtown Committee Meeting
 - Worked at the Carnival – complimented the park bathrooms renovation

- Ribbon Cuttings
- Meeting: Social Services, Public Services Committee, Crossroads, GFD Training
- Smoke on the Mountain Festival
- VA Assoc. of Planning Conference – Norfolk VA
- City Manager interviews
- Joint meeting Radio Interoperability
- Mayor’s forum
- Galax Fiddler’s Convention

Vice Mayor White made the motion to adjourn. Mayor Greene seconded. The motion was unanimously approved by the following votes of “yea”: Mayor Greene, Vice Mayor White, Councilman Haynes, Councilwoman Ritchie, Councilman Larrowe, Councilman Warr and Councilman Henck.

ADJOURNMENT at 8:20 p.m.



Mayor



Clerk

Councilman Larrowe – Thoughts for Council

Introduction

I would like to start and end with the same thought. My purpose here is to help City Council to clearly articulate our path, to move on that path, to achieve results, and to communicate along the way.

No situation is perfect; as a Council we have done much, but much remains to be done. We have done well in some areas, but not in others.

My background as an auditor leads to a focus on what needs to be done, not in the generation of reports on those items already done. We should have other means of communication for that.

Background

The best governed entities have leaders that reflect on and adjust to what they have learned. But in order to do that we need to set a bit of background.

WHAT IS THE COUNCIL-MANAGER FORM OF GOVERNMENT?

The Council-Manager form of government combines the political leadership of elected officials with the managerial experience of an appointed manager. All power and authority to set policy rests with the elected governing body. The governing body in turn hires a manager who has broad authority to run the organization.

The Council-Manager system was designed to promote effective management *within a transparent, responsive, and accountable structure*. The first City to adopt the Council-Manager form of government was Staunton, Virginia in 1917.

The elected council represents its City and develops a long-range vision for its future. It establishes policies that 1) affect the overall operation of the City and 2) are responsive to the needs of residents.

To ensure that these policies are carried out, the Council has the authority to terminate the manager at any time if the manager is not responsive to it.

What this says:

Council establishes the vision, sets the policy and management carries it out. Council holds management accountable for execution.

Let's talk for a minute about vision and policies.

Strategic Plan

Vision

A vision statement might be best thought of as a picture of our City in the future. Our vision statement articulates our hopes and dreams for the City. It serves as our inspiration, and as the framework for [strategic planning](#).

Council has adopted the following vision statement for the City.

Galax is a vibrant, diverse, friendly, citizen engaged community that pursues a culture of excellence.

Mission

A mission statement is to provide direction that will allow the City to earn and deserve the right to govern while providing the best citizen services and experiences possible.

Mission Statement

The City provides high quality public services to sustain an excellent community in which to live, work and play.

Values

In support of our Mission, the Council and Management hold certain core values which are not subject to change. These are:

- ❖ *Personal responsibility - **Personal responsibility** or **Individual Responsibility** is the idea that human beings choose, instigate, or otherwise cause their own actions. A corollary idea is that because we cause our actions, we can be held morally accountable or legally liable.*
- ❖ *Accountability – **Accountability** is the obligation to explain, justify, and take responsibility for one’s actions. It is the state of being accountable, meaning responsible for something or obligated to answer to another.*
- ❖ *Integrity - **Integrity** is the practice of being honest and showing a consistent and uncompromising adherence to strong moral and ethical principles and values.*
- ❖ *Open communications - **Open communication** occurs when the sender and receiver share all the necessary information for both of them to accomplish common objectives. There are no hidden agenda or misrepresentation of information. Open communication is facilitated by effective communication. Effective communication occurs when the receiver understands the message as intended by the sender.*
- ❖ *Continuous learning - On a personal level, continuous learning is about the constant expansion of skills and skill-sets through learning and increasing knowledge. On a professional level, continuous learning is about further expanding organizational and/or individual skill-sets in response to a changing environment and new developments.*

Strategic Goals

The following are specific goals established by Council.

- *Support a Responsive and Effective City Organizational Structure and Staff*
- *Promote Open and Engaged Communications Among Staff, Council, Citizens and the Broader Community*
- *Maintain and Improve the City’s Infrastructure*
- *Promote Galax as a Destination Location for Visitors and New Residents*
- *Support Appropriate Economic & Community Development, including Housing*
- *Promotion of Quality of Life*

To support the attainment of those goals, we asked for:

An Annual Operating and Economic Environment Assessment

Periodic Assessments of Internal Operations, Staffing Requirements and Information Systems

Development of a Management and Key Employee Succession Plan, and,

Action Plans (the Work Plan) designed to accomplish the Goals and Reporting against those Plans

What Have We Done? What Are the Results?

Recognition of Operating and Economic Environment

First, it would be unfair to disregard the impact of COVID and some unanticipated changes in leadership. But those impact all organizations and we too have had to adjust.

Accountability

Fundamentally, accountability includes an assessment of the effectiveness of our efforts. Accountability considers whether we have accomplished our Goals and executed on our Action Plans.

Accountability is not burdened by reasons – or excuses, if simply focuses on did we accomplish that which we set out to accomplish.

How do we know?

Reporting from management, observation, listening, and common sense provide us the information we need to evaluate. But we have to be good listeners. We need to understand and act on what we are being told.

However,

- We have effectively had no reports from management regarding our progress against the Plan;
- We have heard today that we are failing in the Compliance Enforcement area;
 - These concerns might be related to the same City function, but they are individual issues to individual taxpayers and deserve to be heard individually
- We heard during our recent interviews that we lack appropriate internal organizational structure and accountability (we heard this from a source that would know, by the way);
- We hear from Citizens regularly that we do not communicate and execute effectively – and their evaluation of that is the truth, regardless of what we would like the truth to be.
 - The bottom line is that we are what our Citizens say we are – Hard Stop.

What about Effectiveness?

We must demonstrate that we know how to be effective and that we are committed to being effective. What we know is that we can't market or talk our way to effectiveness, we must execute effectively.

As it turns out, Newton's First Law not only applied to the principles of physics observed in the 17th century; it is also true with respect to organizations (and their governing bodies). Paraphrased, Isaac Newton said, "***An object at rest remains at rest, unless acted on by an external force.***"

Why do we fail to act?

Perhaps some in the South consider holding ourselves and employees accountable as impolite. I would offer that it is more impolite to not do our job than it is for someone to hold us accountable for that failure.

Others might consider the truth itself to be impolite. Some say the truth is like poetry, and you know how people hate poetry. I would argue that the truth is not impolite, the truth is simply the truth.

Or in referring back to Newton, it might simply be that doing nothing is often considered to be the easiest or most comfortable course of action. But hopefully, what our citizens are correctly doing is making it less comfortable to do nothing than it is to address actual problems.

Specifically, what have we failed to do?

1. Communication was identified as a critical goal, but after 4 years, we don't even have a policy.
 - a) This lack of follow up implies that we are not serious about one of our most important goals. What does that say about the remainder?
2. Establish or review, and communicate our policies and procedures.
3. Establish a comprehensive training program, relate it to our succession plan, and execute on appropriate training for all employees.
4. We have had no response with regard to:
 - a) Our Recreation Committee Charter revision that has been requested; or,
 - b) Response to any of the requests made with respect to recreation facilities updates or additions.
5. We have had no:
 - a) An Annual Operating and Economic Environment Assessments
 - b) Periodic Assessments of Internal Operations, Staffing Requirements and Information Systems
 - c) Development of a Management and Key Employee Succession Plan, and,
 - d) Comprehensive development of the City's Action (Work) Plans, nor any Reporting against those Plans.

What Do We Need to Do?

Actions for Consideration (that might be helpful)

1. Complete the items noted previously with respect to the Assessments of 1) the Operating and Environmental Factors, 2) Internal Operations, Staffing Requirements, and Information Systems, 3) develop the Management and Key Employee Succession Plan, and 4) complete development of the Action (Work) Plans required by the Strategic Plan, and begin regular reporting against those;
2. Develop a Policies and Procedures Library for internal and external purposes, and begin a systematic annual review of each for any needed modifications;
3. Begin a systematic annual review of the City Code for any needed modifications;
4. Develop a well-organized and communicated method for the collection of complaints, suggestions and feedback from Citizens, Employees, and Council, including a policy relating to whistleblowers;
5. Publish a Resident and Property Owners Guide to centrally communicate many of the routine functions of the City and how to access those.

Conclusion

I said I would end where I started and here it is.

My purpose here is to help City Council to clearly articulate our path, to move on that path, to achieve results, and to communicate along the way.

As a group we have done much, but much remains to be done. We have done well in some areas, but not in others.

When we are not responsive to Citizens, their fundamental question is whether we are serious about serving the citizens or not? Being a member of this Council, I know the answer, but sometimes it is not self-evident to the outside.

Good policy is often not good politics, but public opinion on these issues always follows leadership. We need to provide that leadership.

