



Columbus Consolidated Government

Georgia's First Consolidated Government

Post Office Box 1340
Columbus, Georgia 31902-1340

Donna L. McGinnis, CPA, CFE
Internal Auditor / Compliance Officer

CLERK OF COUNCIL TRANSITIONAL INTERNAL AUDIT

706 225-3119
FAX: 706 225-4447
McGinnis.Donna@columbusga.org

October 28, 2025

AUDIT AUTHORIZATION

This transitional departmental audit was authorized by the City Council on July 22, 2025. Fieldwork began on August 4, 2025, with the audit completed by Internal Auditor Donna McGinnis, accompanied by Forensic Auditors Jonathan Smith, Benjamin Meadow and Grant Conaway.

BACKGROUND

The Clerk of Council's Department is the administrative arm of the City Council. The Clerk prepares and maintains the minutes of Columbus Council meetings. A comprehensive index file of ordinances and resolutions adopted by the City Council is processed and maintained by the Clerk. Additionally, the Clerk is responsible for maintaining and updating the official copy of the Columbus Code and is a supplemental service to departments and paid subscribers. Furthermore, the office is responsible for maintaining and updating the official ownership records for the City's four cemeteries.

THE TEAM

Clerk of Council Lindsey McLemore leads the department, accompanied by Deputy Clerk of Council Tameka Colbert. The team also includes Brittany Jones, Assistant Deputy Clerk of Council and Latreshia Cazeau, Support Clerk.

AUDIT SCOPE

The Audit Scope is intended to address all material aspects of the Clerk of Council's Department. Material aspects included, but were not limited to organizational structure, policies and procedures, compliance reporting, strategic planning, payroll, budgetary control, and training.

AUDIT PROCESS

The Audit Process began with the authorization of the audit. An audit program was developed to address the material aspects of the transitional audit, followed by the entrance conference with the Clerk of Council's team along with the Internal Auditor and our Forensic Auditors. During the conference, those present discussed the preliminary audit program items and were invited to suggest additional areas for inclusion in audit fieldwork.

The audit techniques included reviews of documents and manuals, physical verification of employees and assets, examination of reports prepared by the department and others from independent sources, reviews of strategic planning, interviews, meeting observations, independent verifications, and other appropriate techniques.

During the audit, management was briefed on findings and potential recommendations. Following the audit, a draft report is presented to department management for review and response. A final report including the departmental response is then prepared and distributed to department management, the Mayor and Council, concurrently. A presentation to Council is scheduled to address any questions or concerns that they may have and to avail it to the public. The auditor provides follow-up later to ensure that agreed-to recommendations have been implemented and are properly implemented.

FIELDWORK ACTIVITIES

Fieldwork began with an introductory meeting as well as some after council meeting observation of the Clerk of Council workplace. Workers were observed doing their typical after-meeting jobs which included: approving meeting minutes, writing the summary minutes, and re-watching the city council meeting to write the official minutes. As we observed, we could tell that the days following city council meetings are packed, but so are most days.

During our time with the Clerk of Council, we went through the processes involved in organizing and managing official documents, contracts, etc. Many of these documents won't be used for a year or more but still need to be properly stored and accessible for future references. One of the recurring challenges is that individuals submitting contracts often fail to follow any formal structure or standards. As a result, the Clerk of Council is left to correct errors and finalize documents, adding unnecessary strain to an already demanding workload. Without a clear system in place for submissions, there is a noticeable disconnect between what is expected and what is delivered. We observed some of the tools they use, but it's clear that a more tailored file management system could significantly improve efficiency, especially for frequently mishandled contract types.

On second visit, we learned about the various city boards and noticed that our city has more boards than most, yet many struggle with basic compliance. Several boards are delinquent in submitting required documents and records of meetings, often turning them in late or inconsistently. This reflects poorly on the Clerk of Council, who is responsible for reporting this information using whatever data is available—even when it's outdated. The current lack of accountability allows these boards to operate without structure, which undermines the city's transparency and professionalism. There should be clear expectations and consequences, including the possibility of disbanding non-compliant boards. Overall, it's evident that the Clerk of Council's office wears many hats, and both the contract and board management systems would benefit from improved structure and enforceable guidelines.

We also observed a workday not directly after a city council meeting which was highlighted by Board/Committee compliance dealt with by Clerk of Council Lindsey McLemore. This was a tedious process as most of the Boards that the Clerk of Council deals with are inconsistent with their meeting minutes as well as overall compliance.

A payroll audit was conducted to confirm the physical existence of all paid personnel, and no discrepancies were noted. The timekeeping and documenting procedure is standard, as the role is designated to one individual with exclusive rights within Advantage software to record and submit to the department supervisor for approval and send off.

FINDINGS

1. Since the passing of former Clerk of Council Sandra Davis, there has been a concentrated effort to cross train across the team, though the effort is challenged by calendar deadlines.
2. The Support Clerk II position has been vacant since February of 2025.
3. The current team collaborates well together and effectively addresses a challenging workflow, with numerous requests presented. The team wears many hats-for Council and our citizens.
4. When considering similar activities in sister cities, our Clerk of Council supports 43 advisory councils or boards, with the same roster count as cities with only 10-12 boards.
5. The creation of Standard Operating Procedures for the Clerk of Council's Office has begun. Members of staff are creating SOPs based on their individual duties and forwarding them to the Clerk of Council for review and approval.
6. The Clerk of Council serves as a "librarian" for CCG's operating departments, maintaining copies of operating agreements approved by Council resolution, contracts and memorandums of understanding. Department inquiries are common when copies of documents need retrieval.
7. The Clerk of Council also assists the City Attorney's Office in responding to Open Records Requests.
8. The Clerk of Council also assists citizens with Public Agenda scheduling and requests to appear at City Council meetings.
9. The Clerk of Council maintains ownership records for city-owned cemeteries, and issues interment authorizations, working in collaboration with the Public Works Department-Cemeteries Division to verify and confirm space availability. This collaboration responds to inquiries from grieving families as they complete arrangements for loved ones.
10. The Clerk of Council submits and manages City Council and Clerk of Council budgets.
11. The Clerk of Council books travel arrangements for City Councilors.

12. The Clerk of Council's staff acts as the secretary for the Budget Review Committee, Board of Honor, Audit Committee, Charter Review Commission, and other sub-committees created by Council.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. A Contract Management System such as Cobble Stone or Contract Safe should be purchased, which would more effectively manage the large capacity of agreements that are approved by resolution. In selecting a system, it would be important to work with an Application Developer within CCG's IT Department in order to ensure that we can customize the selected application to meet our needs by allowing CCG Departments to be held responsible for filing the fully executed agreements with the Clerk of Council's Office and then making those agreements accessible to all departments. The anticipated cost of such a customized system is \$6,948 annually.
2. While a Support Clerk II position has been vacant for several months, the current allocation of office space doesn't support this much needed hire. This position should be filled and accommodated to maintain any contract management system that is secured and put in place, ensuring that all agreements approved by resolution are filed in the Clerk of Council's Office. This position would also be responsible for maintaining and destroying these records according to the Local Government Records Retention Schedule set by Georgia Archives, University System of Georgia.
3. Workflow is challenged with many days and hours dedicated to the preparation of minutes, through the review of videos of Council meetings. Lengthy discussions, referrals, and statements made for the record are reviewed several times to ensure accuracy. Across the country, Municipal Clerks are beginning to streamline such repetitive workflow using AI technology, and there is noted success with leading vendors. Artificial Intelligence still should be carefully vetted, as there are risks, and it would be important to work with an Application Developer within CCG's IT Department in selecting a vendor who can best meet CCG's needs.
4. Currently, there is a multi-department process for confirmation and planned internment of loved ones in CCG's Cemeteries. Citizens are reaching out for confirmation of plot availability when they anticipate the loss of a loved one or upon a sudden death. The current process across both departments can take several days to complete based upon current staffing and scheduled deadlines. It is recommended that the responsibility be fully transferred to the Public Works-Cemetery Division. Grieving citizens would benefit from a streamlined process.

AUDITEE RESPONSE

The Clerk of Council's Office serves as the administrative arm of the Columbus, Georgia City Council, providing essential support through records management, documentation of government proceedings, and a deep foundation of institutional knowledge. The Office fulfills a wide range of responsibilities and is relied upon by both city officials and the community at large.

As expectations for transparency and accessibility in local government continue to grow, the Clerk of Council's Office is committed to meeting these demands by working closely with citizens and CCG departments to better understand their needs. We are dedicated to implementing strategies that strengthen accountability, improve accessibility, and modernize operations. Our mission is to carry out this vital role at the highest standard, moving beyond "the way it has always been done" to embrace technology-driven solutions that expand access to information and build stronger connections between citizens and their local government.

Finding(s):

#1 Cross Training

#5 Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs)

Response:

The Clerk of Council's Office acknowledges that the lack of formal cross-training and fully established Standard Operating Procedures has created operational challenges and increased the burden of redistributing duties. With continuous deadlines and frequent requests, staff capacity to dedicate time to these critical areas has been limited. To address this, a shift in strategy has been implemented, with staff adjusting, to ensure essential functions are met while gradually progressing toward the development of cross-training initiatives and formalized procedures.

Finding(s):

#2 Support Clerk II Position Vacancy

Recommendation(s):

#2 Support Clerk II Duties

Response:

The Clerk of Council's Office acknowledges that the Support Clerk II position, one of five departmental positions, has remained vacant since August 11, 2025. A vacancy has been ongoing in the Clerk of Council's Office since February, stemming from internal promotions and the budgetary reallocation needed to reclassify the part-time Deputy Clerk Pro Tem position into a full-time Assistant Deputy Clerk role.

To effectively manage the recommended contract management system and meet the department's growing record-keeping needs, an additional position is needed; however, the allocated office space in the final office location does not support this. The Clerk of Council is requesting that the vacant Support Clerk II position be reclassified as a Records Coordinator position. This reclassification would accurately reflect the expanded duties and responsibilities associated with records management.

As part of this role, the employee would be required to complete the 15-hour State Mandated Training for clerks pursuant to O.C.G.A. 36-1-24 and 36-45-20, which addresses record-keeping requirements and retention schedules for local governments.

Finding(s):

#4 Board, Commissions and Authorities

Response:

The Clerk of Council's Office manages 43 boards, commissions, and authorities with 347 seats, generating a constant flow of requests and administrative demands. Advisory boards, in particular, have become inefficient—often meeting only for departmental updates with little action—leading to quorum issues, vacancies, and declining participation. This workload strains staff resources and diverts time from core responsibilities. To improve efficiency, ensure compliance, and strengthen engagement, the Clerk of Council recommends reducing the number of advisory boards.

Finding(s):

#6 Agreements

Recommendation(s):

#1 Contract Management System

Response:

As custodian of records, the Clerk of Council's Office is responsible for maintaining all agreements approved by resolution. Each originating department must ensure that a fully executed copy of its agreements is submitted to the Clerk's Office. Given that retention periods vary by agreement type, a contract management system would allow departments to enter the required details to determine appropriate destruction dates, ensuring strict adherence to the Local Government Retention Schedules approved by the State Records Committee of Georgia.

Implementation of a contract management system would also enhance efficiency by enabling the Clerk's Office to track submissions, manage retention schedules, issue Certificates of Destruction, and respond more effectively to departmental inquiries and open records requests. To successfully operate this system and manage the significant volume of agreements.

Finding(s):

#12 Clerk of Council's Office Serving as Board Secretary

Recommendation(s):

#3 Council Minute Preparation – AI Technology Assistance

Response:

The Clerk of Council is responsible for preparing agendas, summary minutes, and official minutes for the City Council, Budget Review Committee, Charter Review Commission, Board of Honor, Audit Committee, and other sub-committees created by Council. These responsibilities are highly time-intensive, with the preparation of official minutes of City Council being the most demanding. City Council meetings are lengthy and include numerous referrals, official statements, and actions, requiring several days to accurately compile into the official record.

This process is further complicated when meetings occur in close succession, sometimes the following week, leaving staff with limited time to complete minutes while also preparing for the next meeting. The compressed timelines force staff to prioritize deadlines at the expense of other duties, creating inefficiencies across the office.

The implementation of AI technology could significantly improve efficiency in preparing minutes, ensuring that the Clerk of Council's Office can remain compliant with the Georgia

Open Meetings Act, maintain transparency with the public, and provide timely support not only to City Council but also to the additional committees it serves.

Finding(s):

#9 Cemetery Ownership Records and Interment Authorizations

Recommendation(s):

#4 Cemetery Processes

Response:

The Clerk of Council's Office serves as custodian of ownership records for city-owned cemeteries, working in collaboration with the Cemetery Division of Public Works to process interment authorizations, assist with future arrangements, and respond to inquiries regarding space availability. Depending on prior usage of a cemetery lot, staff must often conduct detailed research using burial records accessible only through the Public Works website. In many cases, additional resources such as *FindaGrave.com* are consulted to establish lineage, as ownership records were not consistently transferred in past generations.

This outdated process is time-consuming, and places added stress on grieving families and funeral directors who require timely confirmations to complete arrangements. Implementing dedicated cemetery management software is essential to streamline operations, bridge the Clerk of Council's Office and the Cemetery Division, and ensure this sensitive service is delivered with accuracy, compassion, and efficiency.