



MINUTES

City Commission Workshop

9:00 AM – Friday, December 12, 2025 – Eustis Woman's Club, 227 N. Center Street, Eustis, FL 32726

Call to Order: 9:00 a.m.

Acknowledgement of Quorum and Proper Notice

PRESENT: Commissioner Michael Holland, Commissioner Emily Lee, Commissioner George Asbate, Vice Mayor Gary Ashcraft, Mayor Willie L. Hawkins

1. Workshop Item with Discussion, Public Input and Direction

1.1 Discussion with Dr. Richard Levey

Tom Carrino, City Manager, commented on the City's efforts to develop a shared vision for the downtown through the master plan process and, as part of that, they have engaged Dr. Levey to assist.

Dr. Richard Levey talked about goal setting and indicated his feeling that they have a vision and now they need to set priorities. He indicated he would explain the process they used to do the research. He stated the meeting is about bringing together the Commissioners. He reviewed the ground rules noting the point is to facilitate Commission discussion.

Dr. Levey discussed the need for goal and priority setting in strategic planning. He commented on the benefits of goal setting: 1) Optimizes organizational performance; 2) Provides efficient allocation of limited resources; 3) Boosts internal morale; 4) Attracts outside resources; 5) Enhances public confidence; 6) Anticipatory government; and 7) Enables Commission to successfully introduce and lead change.

Dr. Levey explained their process beginning with one-on-one interviews with the City Manager and department heads and then Commissioners and Mayor. He cited various data resources they used to collect additional information.

Dr. Levey reviewed their six research questions that they asked of both staff and Commissioners. He explained that he was not trying to re-write the vision but to get their opinions on the vision. He emphasized that it is critically important that staff and the Commission are aligned. He commented on the SWOT analysis, top three downtown development priorities, and narrowing down the top priorities.

Dr. Levey began a review of his research findings beginning with their definition of success for the workshop. The number one priority among staff and the Commission was the need for Commission consensus and collaboration. The second among both staff and Commission was the need to establish clear priorities.

Dr. Levey moved to Question #1 regarding the Master Plan Vision. He reiterated the purpose was not to rewrite the vision. He discussed the results and cited the notable comments. He then reviewed the results of Question #2 - Most important master plan goal with the top being "create a true waterfront downtown" with the Commission also noting the need to leverage tourism. He cited a comment for the City to "just get something started".

Dr. Levey then reviewed the results from Question #3 - SWOT analysis with the Commission top response indicating the lake/waterfront is the top strength and second highest is City-owned land. Under weaknesses, staff expressed concern about lack of unity of the Commission and the Commission cited no visionary leadership. He emphasized staff's concern about the lack of clear direction from the Commission. He also noted the Commission's concern about the lack of support from downtown merchants and project execution.

Under Opportunities, staff prioritized the regional trail and local trail connections. Dr. Levey suggested the possibility of the trails being radial and going out to the neighborhoods to draw people downtown. He cited the possibility of a network of trails rather than just one regional trail. He indicated that the City could work on that separately from the other agencies and noted how long it will take to develop the regional trail versus local trails.

Dr. Levey continued the review of opportunities cited by staff and then by the Commission including Ag Tech, expanded lakefront and relocation of the pool, and Lake Sumter/Lake Tech/UCF partnerships for economic development. He cited the other opportunities mentioned by the Commission including responsible use of debt, regional trail with local trail connections to neighborhoods and hospitality - creative tourism. He compared the City's waterfront development to the City of Clermont. He expressed support for relocation of the aquatic center due to the probability that people going to the pool probably are frequenting the downtown restaurants and stores.

Dr. Levey reviewed the threats cited by staff and the Commission and noted that both mentioned the top threat as lack of Commission consensus and fear of bold decisions by the Commission. He commented on the need for the Commission to be bold. He cited the other threats noted by the Commission including City reputation with developers, character of the three-block redevelopment, and competition from other cities. He noted staff's concerns regarding state legislation as a threat, market demand and financing conditions and lack of a parking plan. He commented on the need to know what's being developed before a parking plan can really be implemented.

Dr. Levey then reviewed the top priorities for capital projects as discussed with the Commission and department heads with the number one priority being the waterfront promenade and Ferran Park. He commented on how trails have helped other cities and noted that Clermont brought the regional trail right through their downtown. He expressed support for development of the local trails. He further reviewed the other priorities including community center relocation and the issues related to that including use of the facility and fees for use.

Dr. Levey discussed the Economic Development top priorities beginning with staff comments and then Commission. He cited the need to incorporate affordable housing together with quality housing. He noted the hotel was the top priority for the Commission, followed by a private sector partner for the three blocks. He commented on how long that property has been vacant and that anything that is done to improve the downtown will increase the value of that property. He emphasized they don't need to rush out and develop that property. He stated it will happen when it happens.

Commissioner Asbate asked for clarification and asked if he is saying stop working on the middle with Dr. Levey responding they should continue marketing while working on these other things that will improve the downtown. The market will see the other improvements and make it easier to attract developers for the three blocks. He indicated the City couldn't really accelerate that development unless they want to give the property away.

Dr. Levey reviewed the Programs/Events/Services top priorities - attract more privately managed events, and improving the relationship with the downtown businesses. He said that the more they improve the downtown the more this type of activity will be attracted to the downtown.

Dr. Levey then discussed the overall priorities with staff identifying the waterfront as their top and the Commission identifying the regional and local trails as their top. The Commission's second was waterfront and Ferran Park and third was the hotel. He stated that development of the waterfront, trails and hotel would help with attracting development to the three blocks and cited how that would increase the value of the three blocks.

Commissioner Asbate asked Dr. Levey to provide a possible timeline for development of the three blocks and emphasized that downtown development needs to be the entire downtown, not just the three blocks.

Dr. Levey responded that the three blocks shouldn't be the focus and that the top three overall priorities are spot on: regional/local trails, waterfront/Ferran Park and the hotel. He commented the private sector will see the improvements and respond. He encouraged them not to worry about the three blocks.

Mayor Hawkins commented on how the Commission has been too focused on the three blocks.

Discussion was held regarding not focusing on the three blocks but on development of the entire downtown and waterfront.

Dr. Levey commented on the benefit to creating local trails out to the neighborhoods which could be worked on right away.

Commissioner Lee asked how long it would take to develop a trail along the railroad track with Mr. Carrino responding that the regional trail would be a long-term transportation project. He explained how local trails could be implemented.

Vice Mayor Ashcraft noted a portion of the master plan that talks about connectivity and cited the possibility of a bicycle flyover at the end of Bates Avenue. Dr. Levey commented on the benefits to the community.

Mr. Carrino explained that the first phase of the regional trail is completing the feasibility study which will determine where the trail should be located. He noted that several years ago the Commission agreed that the trail should go through downtown. He commented on how Tavares has been working on developing the railroad bed for a trail for over ten years. He stated his belief that to get the railroad bed for development would take a long time and involve millions of dollars.

Dr. Levey commented on how development of the local trails could bring people to the downtown and not wait on the regional trail.

Commissioner Asbate expressed support for the local trails and commented on whether or not the City could require developers to designate areas for those trails.

Further discussion was held regarding the development of local trails and how some communities have accomplished those.

Mayor Hawkins asked if trails increase property values with Dr. Levey stating he believes so and Commissioner Asbate stating there is a study that shows a 10% increase.

BREAK: 10:09 a.m. RECONVENE: 10:23

Dr. Levey commented on Daniel Burnham, the designer of Chicago, and the need to think big. He then opened discussion to identify the short and long-term priorities. He commented on the need for there to be a Eustis "Robert Moses" whose focus is on how to implement their priorities. He said it shouldn't be the City Manager as they have a City to run. He asked the Commission to each offer their opinions with the final goal being to look at next steps.

Mayor Hawkins opined the #1 priority should be the waterfront starting with the bandshell. He stated the bandshell needs to be updated and commented that could help facilitate more downtown private events.

Vice Mayor Ashcraft cited problems with the Lake Walk. He questioned if they want to build in front of Sharp's Mobile Home Park and have that as a background. He commented on the need to determine how to develop the promenade around the waterfront.

Commissioner Lee noted that the City doesn't own Sharp's. She expressed support for relocating the pool.

Dr. Levey commented on the possibility of obtaining outside funding/grants to assist with relocating the pool.

Commissioner Lee cited the boat dock and seaplane dock projects as a way to attract more tourism.

Commissioner Asbate noted the weekly fresh market and how it has increased from once per month to every week.

Vice Mayor Ashcraft stated that there is no place downtown for people to lodge. He indicated he spoke with someone who said they could bring a major league fishing tournament to the City if there was a place to stay.

Commissioner Lee added that the City also has the sailing center who hosts sailing regattas and they have no place to stay. Commissioner Asbate noted that there is a local group that hosts regular fishing tournaments.

Dr. Levey emphasized they don't have to identify a specific location for the hotel, just know that is a priority.

Discussion was held regarding the need for a hotel and the lack of consensus on where it should be located.

Commissioner Asbate expressed support for further considering the previous proposal submitted. He cited the possibility of getting County funding.

Kathleen Dial, Lake County Economic Development, explained the County's hotel incentive program and noted that highly amenitized hotels don't come to Lake County.

Dr. Levey asked about their process with Ms. Dial responding that it is first come first serve for five hotels. She explained that the funding is based on a portion of unincorporated ad valorem taxes. She further explained the process and noted the claw back requirement.

Commissioner Holland stated that the hotel and trails are important. He indicated that if the City focuses on the trails, waterfront and hotel; that will spur other development.

Discussion was held regarding what parking would be required of the hotel development.

Dr. Levey confirmed that they agree that the focus will be the waterfront, hotel and trails.

Discussion was held regarding the need to plan for parking and the possible need for more than one hotel.

Mr. Carrino commented on creating spaces and places where people want to be then work force development will take care of itself.

Commissioner Asbate asked if golf-cart friendly communities are beneficial with Dr. Levey stating he hasn't seen enough about them to say if they're good or bad.

Further discussion was held regarding golf carts and golf cart parking.

Dr. Levey asked for discussion regarding action items. He asked for confirmation that the waterfront, trails and hotel would be their focus for the downtown development.

Mayor Hawkins expressed support for focusing on getting the boat started with Commissioner Asbate reporting that they have met with the pontoon manufacturer in Tavares and they are holding a pontoon for the City; however, the City has not been able to get the dock in place.

Miranda Burrowes, Assistant City Manager, explained staff is working on the engineering for the boat dock but the construction is on the unfunded list so an action item might be to get that off the unfunded list.

Mayor Hawkins reported they are about to test the seaplane. He commented that there are some things the County may be doing that might affect the relocation of the pool.

Ms. Burrowes explained that the City has been in discussion with the Lake County School Board regarding the possibility of obtaining the Curtright Center which could possibly be used for relocation of the pool.

Discussion was held regarding the possibility of creating an aquatic center at Carver Park.

Mr. Carrino asked Commissioner Holland for his thoughts about relocating the pool with Mr. Holland expressing support for moving the pool which will enhance the bandshell and provide more space for events at the bandshell. It was confirmed that a capital project was in place for improvements to the bandshell.

Dr. Levey commented on Sharp's MHP and the possibility of it being acquired by the private sector.

Dr. Levey asked for discussion regarding the community building.

Discussion was held regarding the need to identify an alternate method or location for the community center.

Ms. Burrowes explained they have drafted an RFP regarding the community center site and they got Commission feedback. She suggested an action item could be to get that RFP revised and issued.

Mayor Hawkins suggested that the community building could be relocated to Carver Park, if the City is able to obtain the Curtright Center.

Commissioner Asbate commented on the need to determine what is their identity with Dr. Levey responding those are legitimate questions but beyond the scope of the current discussion.

Mayor Hawkins asked if Ferran Park is what they want it to be?

Dr. Levey commented that the master plan has ideas for use of the waterfront. He stated they probably need to do the next step of the conceptual plan and determine the role of Ferran Park in the waterfront.

Mr. Carrino cited the 2008 downtown plan and the Ferran Park master plan. He commented on what was done in the area based on that master plan.

Mayor Hawkins asked if that is in keeping with what they want to do moving forward. He asked if they want to focus on expanding northward.

Commissioner Lee commented on the beauty of the park and making it more attractive. She stated she would like to see art brought back into the downtown.

Discussion was held regarding other cities that have beautified areas within their community with Dr. Levey commenting that those are good examples of public investment resulting in private investment.

Commissioner Asbate asked if there would be a way to capitalize on the Ocala Forest and commented on the lack of lodging in the area and that Eustis is the gateway to the Ocala Forest.

Dr. Levey commented that could be a way to market a hotel.

Mayor Hawkins emphasized the need to engage the downtown businesses. He noted the City holds events in the downtown but there are businesses that won't stay open for those events.

Discussion was held regarding the need for the City and businesses to work together and getting the businesses to participate in the events. Commissioner Asbate cited the number of attendees at the recent Light Up.

Dr. Levey indicated he would write up notes on the discussion and cited the action items developed for the waterfront. He congratulated them on setting some clear priorities through the workshop.

Discussion was held regarding next steps and the need to keep the momentum with a suggestion to hold a workshop to develop the next steps.

Dr. Levey suggested letting him contact staff and discuss. He emphasized they need someone to keep them focused.

Discussion was held regarding meeting again with a suggestion to meet by the end of January.

BREAK: 11:25 a.m. RECONVENE: 11:37 a.m.

Mr. Carrino confirmed the Commission wanted to go ahead and schedule a follow-up workshop.

CONSENSUS: It was a consensus to hold the workshop on Thursday, January 29th, at 1:30 p.m.

Mr. Carrino stated staff would work with Dr. Levey and discuss next steps that would lead into the workshop with the Commission.

Dr. Levey asked the Commission to provide any feedback to staff regarding the workshop.

1.2 Review of carryover of prior years' capital projects

Commissioner Asbate indicated that he had not been able to review all of the information or get all of his questions answered. He asked if they could put off this discussion until January 22nd.

Mr. Carrino indicated they were only going to be able to discuss that day anyway. He noted they could move it to January 8th; however, that is the organizational meeting and they try to keep that agenda light.

Mayor Hawkins asked the Commissioners to review and provide their comments to the staff.

Commissioner Lee recommended they meet individually with the staff to get questions answered.

Ms. Burrowes distributed to the Commission the list of carry-over project funds.

Mayor Hawkins asked each Commissioner for any comments on the carry-overs.

Commissioner Holland stated he had met with staff and he was good to move forward.

Commissioner Lee indicated she was also good to move forward.

Vice Mayor Ashcraft asked if the Carver Park shade structure is budgeted or in reserves with Mr. Carrino stating that is actively budgeted under the CRA but the funds have not been expended.

Mr. Carrino explained that the projects are those that no purchase orders have been done for. He explained that if a project has been budgeted but it is determined they will not proceed then the funds go back into the revenues. He stated that the projects on the list were previously approved but the funds have not been expended yet.

Vice Mayor Ashcraft commented on the amounts in reserves with Mr. Carrino noting that not all of the funds have large reserves. He explained the various reasons for the reserves and why a project may not have moved forward.

Ms. Burrowes explained the list she distributed which included explanations on the various projects.

Vice Mayor Ashcraft expressed support for reviewing the entire list of projects.

Commissioner Asbate noted he had not had time to review all of the information and expressed concern.

Mayor Hawkins went through the list asking for items that someone has concern about.

Discussion was held regarding the need to have funds set aside for the regional trail.

Ms. Burrowes reported that the City Hall security cameras have been completed and the request has been withdrawn.

Rick Gierok, Engineering and Capital Projects Director, reported on the greenhouse project. He explained that the City hired a horticulturist who will help get that finalized. The structure is complete and they are working on the irrigation.

Commissioner Asbate asked to implement a mid-year review of the capital projects so funds may be re-allocated if a project is not going to be completed with Ms. Burrowes indicating that staff is open to that suggestion.

Vice Mayor Ashcraft asked about the Bay Street drainage improvements with Mr. Carrino explaining that is funding for parking lot improvements. Mr. Gierok further explained that the Bay Pharmacy parking lot was going to be redone to change the flow of runoff. He indicated that FDOT is still working on that and then the funding will be used for engineering the intersection.

Discussion was held regarding traffic calming and the whether the property tax will be eliminated.

Discussion was held regarding implementing a mid-year review each year.

Mr. Carrino asked the Commissioners to meet with staff to discuss the projects so they are ready to move forward on January 22nd.

Discussion was held regarding whether any projects will be held up with Mr. Carrino explaining there is one project for the eastern plant turbine that they will have to ask the contractor to extend the date the price is good for.

Mr. Gierok explained how multi-year projects are budgeted and how he can change some of the budgeting so there aren't as many rollovers.

Discussion was held regarding the Carver Park basketball court pavilion and re-allocation of those funds.

Lori Carr, Finance Director, explained that when a purchase order is issued it means that those funds are committed to the project and that keeps the City from being in violation of a contract. She also explained that only the General Fund can be utilized for different things. The other funds are restricted for specific uses.

CONSENSUS: It was a consensus of the Commission for each of the Commissioners to meet with staff prior to January 22nd to discuss the carry over projects so they are ready to vote on the 22nd.

Discussion regarding appointment of Interim City Manager

Commissioner Asbate asked for discussion about the resignation of Tom Carrino and the interim process. He asked if they need to direct staff on how to proceed such as development of an RFP.

Karen Crouch, Human Resources Director, stated she can ask Purchasing to begin the RFP process and obtain a consultant to assist with the process.

Mari Leisen noted a budget amendment will be required to pay for that consultant.

Commissioner Lee commented they need to determine what they are looking for.

Mayor Hawkins stated they are losing a really good City Manager and all of the department heads agree. He commented on the need for continuity and expressed support for appointing a City staff member as interim manager.

Mr. Carrino confirmed his last day would be March 20th.

Mayor Hawkins asked to have Chief Capri serve as interim City Manager.

Ms. Crouch expressed concern due to him being part of the Police Pension Fund. She indicated he would have to stay as Chief in order to remain in the fund.

Ms. Burrowes announced she would not be interested in the City Manager position but would be supportive of whomever the Commission selects.

Mayor Hawkins stated his thought that appointing Chief Capri would show stability with Chief Capri commenting on possible issues if they select the wrong person.

Mayor Hawkins expressed support for the department heads reporting to Miranda Burrowes.

Commissioner Holland suggested they discuss the appointment of an interim manager on January 8th and agreed with the need to have stability during the interim.

Mr. Carrino stated it will take at least six months to find the new city manager with Commissioner Holland estimating it will probably take six to twelve months.

Discussion was held regarding staff moving forward with the process.

Mr. Carrino indicated that staff would be moving forward with obtaining a consultant to conduct the search.

Commissioner Asbate requested that they provide a copy of the draft RFP for the consultant.

CONSENSUS: It was a consensus of the Commission for Mr. Carrino and staff to proceed with the solicitation for a consultant.

2. Adjournment: 12:49 p.m.

**These minutes reflect the actions taken and portions of the discussion during the meeting. To review the entire discussion concerning any agenda item, go to www.eustis.org and click on the video for the meeting in question. A DVD of the entire meeting or CD of the entire audio recording of the meeting can be obtained from the office of the City Clerk for a fee.*

CHRISTINE HALLORAN
City Clerk

EMILY A. LEE
Mayor/Commissioner