



MINUTES

City Commission Meeting

6:00 PM – Thursday, March 05, 2026 – City Hall

Invocation: Pastor Jay Cochenour, Life Community Church

Pledge of Allegiance: Commissioner George Asbate

Call to Order: 6:01 p.m.

Acknowledge of Quorum and Proper Notice

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

1. Agenda Update

City Manager Tom Carrino noted no agenda update.

2. Approval of Minutes

2.1 Approval of Minutes for February 5, 2026, City Commission Meeting and February 19, 2026, City Commission Meeting

Motion made by Commissioner Holland, Seconded by Commissioner Hawkins to approve both meeting minutes as submitted. Motion passed on the following vote:

Voting Yea: Commissioner Holland, Commissioner Asbate, Vice Mayor Ashcraft, Commissioner Hawkins, Mayor Lee

3. Presentations

3.1 City of Eustis Police Chief's Award to Officer Cody Wade

Police Chief Craig Capri presented the Chief's Award to Senior Detective Cody Wade, recognizing his exceptional contributions to the department. He highlighted Detective Wade's dedication in voluntarily scheduling training sessions, restructuring the IST training schedule for more consistent officer training throughout the year, and frequently providing impromptu training even on his days off. Chief Capri emphasized that Detective Wade's initiative has strengthened overall officer capability and professionalism while boosting morale and fostering a culture of appreciation within the department. In closing, he noted that Detective Wade consistently demonstrates integrity and accountability, voicing concerns when necessary and always advocating for fairness and continuous improvement.

3.2 Powerhouse Youth Project - Presentation by Scott Chevalier

Commissioner Hawkins introduced Scott Chevalier from Powerhouse Youth Project, noting his work in local schools and the positive outcomes he achieves with students.

Scott Chevalier explained that Powerhouse Youth Project began in 1999 in Nashville, Tennessee. It has been in Florida for nine years and has operated in Lake County for five years. The organization currently serves five Lake County high schools with plans to expand to middle school campuses.

He shared concerning statistics about student preparedness, noting that less than thirty percent of high school students nationally believe they are adequately prepared for life after high school, and sixty-three percent of graduates never accomplish what they planned when they graduated. He emphasized that students need "direction beyond the diploma" and must understand their purpose in life.

The program operates through seventeen-week sessions on campus, beginning with "boot camp" to develop new mindsets, goal setting, and overcoming excuses. He shared success stories, including Zoe, a sixteen-year-old pregnant student who became the first in her family to graduate high school, and Josiah, who overcame difficult family circumstances to launch his own mobile car detailing business with mentorship and support from the program.

Concluding, Mr. Chevalier emphasized that every young person has passion and purpose but needs support to achieve their goals, citing S. Truett Cathy's philosophy that "it is easier to build boys and girls than to mend men and women."

4. Audience to be Heard

City Attorney, Sasha Garcia requested comments from the audience at 6:28 pm.

Russel Patton deferred to speak.

Marie Aliberti, representing the Lake Eustis Area Chamber of Commerce, thanked the City Commission and staff for their work on the 124th Annual George Fest. She highlighted the various events including the parade, carnival, Little Miss Eustis pageant, chili and wings cook-off, breakfast, decorating contests, children's bike parade, king and queen crowning, ring drawing, and beverage tent.

Continuing, she praised the city departments including police and fire, and maintenance crews, noting the outstanding entertainment and family activities that created memories and showcased the City of Eustis's spirit.

Bryan Broomfield, a city resident, offered two thank-you messages. First, he commended Police Chief Capri and the Eustis Police Department for stopping an armed individual during the Heritage Festival, preventing what could have been a complete disaster. He also thanked the person who called in the tip, emphasizing the importance of speaking up when seeing something wrong.

Second, he thanked Commissioner Hawkins and the Heritage Committee for recognizing community members who often go unnoticed or are noted for negative reasons, helping to show that everyone contributes to the community.

City Attorney Garcia closed public input at 6:38 p.m.

5. Consent Agenda

5.1 Resolution Number 2026-26: Authorizing Award of Bid Number 001-26 to JH Construction, LLC., for the Public Works Administration Building Project and Authorizing Budget Transfers and Approving a Purchase in Excess of \$100,000.00

5.2 Resolution Number 2026-28: Approving an Expenditure in Excess of \$100,000.00 for Engineering Construction Administration Services for the Northshore Bridge and Culvert Engineering Project

Motion made by Commissioner Holland, Seconded by Vice Mayor Ashcraft to approve the Consent Agenda. Motion passed on the following vote:

Voting Yea: Commissioner Holland, Commissioner Asbate, Vice Mayor Ashcraft, Commissioner Hawkins, Mayor Lee

6. Ordinances, Public Hearings, & Quasi Judicial Hearings

6.1 Resolution Number 2026-24: Variance for Fence Height and Type for Property located at 2044 E Orange Avenue (after-the-fact)

City Attorney Garcia announced a Resolution of the City Commission of the City of Eustis, Florida, Granting Approval for a Variance to the City of Eustis Land Development Regulations Section 110-5.7 to allow a Six-Foot Barbed Wire Fence at 2044 E. Orange Avenue, Alternate Key 1792941.

Senior Planner Kyle Wilkes presented the after-the-fact variance request for a six-foot barbed wire fence at 2044 East Orange Avenue. The applicant, Andrew Patton of Florida Business LLC, stated that his fence contractor assured him that a barbed wire fence would be permitted as other properties in the area also have barbed wire fences, including the city cemetery. The applicant was cited by code enforcement after installation and sought to remedy the situation.

Senior Planner Wilkes explained that barbed wire fences are only permitted for agricultural uses, conservation land use districts, and general industrial land use districts. However, staff found that barbed wire fences already exist in the area and recommended approval based on findings that there would be no negative effects on the community or public health, safety, and welfare.

Commissioner Asbate disclosed that he owns property adjacent to the west and, while not a fan of barbed wire fencing, he believed it fit the area and that the applicant acted in good faith despite being misled. Mayor Lee noted similar fencing across the street.

City Manager Carrino clarified that approval would only legalize the existing fence and not allow additional fencing or barbed wire.

City Attorney Garcia opened the public hearing at 6:28 p.m. and requested comments from the public.

Russell Patten, speaking for his son Andrew, explained that both he and his son were told by the city that no permit was necessary, and the fence was installed for security after an attempted break-in. He noted that similar fencing exists on neighboring properties.

Timothy Wayne Gladman questioned the necessity of barbed wire and whether it might be considered booby trapping. He suggested it was tacky without proper purpose.

City Attorney Garcia closed the public hearing at 6:33 p.m.

Motion made by Commissioner Holland, Seconded by Commissioner Asbate to approve Resolution Number 2026-24. Motion passed on the following vote:

Voting Yea: Commissioner Holland, Commissioner Asbate, Vice Mayor Ashcraft, Commissioner Hawkins, Mayor Lee

6.2 Resolution Number 2026-27: Interim City Manager's Employment Agreement

City Attorney Garcia announced a Resolution of the City Commission of the City of Eustis, Lake County, Florida, Approving the Employment Agreement between the City of Eustis and Rick Gierok, as set forth in Exhibit "A".

City Manager Carrino briefly presented the employment agreement for Rick Gierok as Interim City Manager, noting that several iterations had been reviewed by the commission.

City Attorney Garcia opened the public hearing at 6:34 p.m. and with no comments being offered she closed the public hearing at 6:34 p.m.

Motion made by Commissioner Asbate, Seconded by Commissioner Holland to approve Resolution Number 2026-27. Motion passed on the following vote:

Voting Yea: Commissioner Holland, Commissioner Asbate, Vice Mayor Ashcraft, Commissioner Hawkins, Mayor Lee

City Manager Carrino requested that Rick Gierok serve as Acting City Manager effectively at the end of the meeting to avoid confusion with staff during his final week, while he would remain present in the office through the following Friday to wrap up projects. The consensus of the Commission was to agree with his request.

6.3 Resolution Number 2026-30: Approval of Purchase and Sale Agreement for Acquisition of Property Located at 21 North Grove Street

City Attorney Garcia announced a Resolution of the City Commission of the City of Eustis, Florida, Approving and Authorizing the Execution of a Purchase and Sale Agreement for the Acquisition of Real Property located at 21 North Grove Street; Finding a Valid Public Purpose; Authorizing the Mayor and City Clerk to Execute the Agreement; Providing for Implementation and Providing for an Effective Date.

City Manager Carrino reported that staff moved quickly to negotiate terms with the property owner following previous discussions with the Commission. Key terms include a negotiated purchase price of \$1,400,000 with a \$70,000 deposit (five percent), a forty-five-day due diligence period with one thirty-day extension if needed, and ninety days to close. The City does have the ability to terminate the contract based on due diligence findings.

The purchase addresses critical space needed as City Hall is "busting at the seams" and requires additional office space. The solid concrete building and two parking lots on Orange Avenue provide long-term value for expanding city operations while maintaining proximity to existing facilities, supporting improved service delivery to residents and businesses

Commissioner Asbate, who participated in the property inspection, praised the building's solid concrete construction and highlighted the value of two parking lots included with the property. He noted the building's location on the city's gateway and its proximity to City Hall.

City Attorney Garcia opened the public hearing at 6:41 p.m. There were no comments offered. She closed the public hearing at 6:41 p.m.

Motion made by Commissioner Holland, Seconded by Vice Mayor Ashcraft to approve Resolution Number 2026-30. Motion passed on the following vote:

Voting Yea: Commissioner Holland, Commissioner Asbate, Vice Mayor Ashcraft, Commissioner Hawkins, Mayor Lee

6.4 Second Reading of Ordinance Number 2026-05: Burger King Restaurant New Noncompliant Pylon Sign – SR 19 N

City Attorney Garcia announced an Ordinance of the City of Eustis, Lake County, Florida, Approving a Conditional Sign Permit for the Existing Freestanding Sign located at the Burger King Restaurant at 1909 State Road 19 North, Allowing a Maximum Height of 42 Feet and an 89 Square Foot Sign Cabinet; Authorizing the City Commission to Establish Conditions of

Approval at Adoption; Including but not limited to Beautification or Maintenance Commitments; Providing for Conflicts; Providing for Severability; and Providing an Effective Date.

Commissioner Asbate appreciated how the commission transformed something potentially negative into something positive through the approval process with beautification commitments.

City Attorney Garcia opened the public hearing at 6:43 p.m. and with no comments being offered she closed the public hearing at 6:43 p.m.

Motion made by Commissioner Holland, Seconded by Vice Mayor Ashcraft to approve Ordinance Number 2026-05 on second reading. Motion passed on the following vote:

Voting Yea: Commissioner Holland, Commissioner Asbate, Vice Mayor Ashcraft, Commissioner Hawkins, Mayor Lee

6.5 First Reading of Ordinance Number 2026-12: Amendment to the Previously Approved Conditional Use Permit – Additional Emergency Identification Signage for Orlando Health Eustis (15719 U.S. Highway 441)

City Attorney Garcia announced an Ordinance of the City Commission of the City of Eustis, Florida, Amending the Previously Approved Conditional Use Permit (CUP) for the Orlando Health Eustis Campus located at 15719 U.S. Highway 441 to allow additional Building - Mounted Emergency Identification Signs; Providing for Conditions; Providing for Conflicts; Providing for Severability; and Providing for an Effective Date.

Development Services Director Mike Lane presented the request for two new emergency identification signs on the Orlando Health Eustis Campus. The signs would be building-mounted on a rooftop architectural feature, with Orlando Health implementing this change across their entire ER system to make emergency rooms more visible from US Highway 441, which carries 50,500 vehicles daily.

Andrew McCown from GAI Consultants, representing Orlando Health, explained that the architectural feature is integral to the building structure, not just a sign cabinet. Orlando Health has been implementing this red emergency identification feature across their ER system to guide people to physical entrances and make emergency services more visible from a distance.

A few commissioners expressed concerns about setting precedents for tall signage and questioned why the request was not included in the original approval. Commissioner Asbate opposed starting "sign wars" in Eustis and preferred monument signage closer to the road. Vice Mayor Ashcraft worried about creating precedents for bigger signs, while Commissioner Hawkins favored monument signs for better aesthetics.

Commissioner Holland noted that other Orlando Health facilities, including their newest in Lake Mary, do not have similar tall red signs. The commissioners questioned why emergency identification could not be accomplished with monument signage or side-mounted signs.

City Attorney Garcia opened the public hearing at 6:58 p.m.

Timothy Wayne Gladman spoke in opposition, calling the sign terrible and noting it resembled old pharmacy signs, questioning why "Orlando Health" was larger than "Emergency" if visibility was truly the concern.

There being no further public comments, City Attorney Garcia closed the public hearing at 6:59 p.m.

After further discussion, the Commission indicated they would prefer monument signage alternatives and were not supportive of the rooftop signage concept.

Motion made by Commissioner Holland, Seconded by Commissioner Asbate to **deny** Ordinance Number 2026-12 on first reading. Motion passed on the following vote:

Voting Yea: Commissioner Holland, Commissioner Asbate, Vice Mayor Ashcraft, Commissioner Hawkins, Mayor Lee

7. Other Business

7.1 Discussion: City's Evaluation and Appraisal Report (EAR)

Development Services Director Mike Lane reported receiving the objections, recommendations, and comments (ORC) letter from Florida Commerce regarding the city's EAR submission. The state had one objection, because staff forgot to include the capital improvements plan in the original submission, which will be included when the adoption ordinance is submitted. The two advisory comments from DEP regarding wastewater facility analysis were resolved when the consultant clarified that the required information was included in the data and analysis section.

Continuing, he noted that their consultant indicated this was the first comprehensive plan EAR project to successfully navigate the approval process since the passage of Senate Bill 180, with zero previous approvals. The city has one hundred and eighty days from February 9th to complete the adoption process, leaving approximately five months.

The consensus of the commission was to direct staff to proceed with preparing the adoption hearing, which will be a public hearing allowing for community input.

7.2 Discussion: City Commission Attorney

City Manager Carrino and HR Director Karen Crouch presented information about the city's legal services arrangement. The current agreement with Bowen/Schroth, represented by Derek Schroth and Sasha Garcia, has served the city for approximately eighteen years. The agreement, which began in 2023, auto-renews annually each February with a sixty-day cancellation notice requirement.

Ms. Crouch presented research on surrounding cities' legal arrangements, finding three cities with in-house attorneys (Ocala, Kissimmee, and New Smyrna Beach) and nine cities using external counsel with varying retainer arrangements. The research showed significant variation in costs and services, with some cities paying \$15,000 monthly retainers versus Eustis's \$3,500 monthly retainer.

The current \$3,500 monthly retainer covers attorney availability, phone conferences, and attendance at regular commission meetings. All other services are billed at \$250 per hour for attorneys and \$135 per hour for paralegals. Recent annual legal costs have been approximately \$296,000 to \$311,000, including both retainer and additional services.

Ms. Crouch projected that an in-house attorney would cost approximately \$290,000 annually in salary and benefits, plus additional costs for paralegals, training, and litigation expenses that would still require outside counsel.

Commissioner Asbate expressed concerns about some legal decisions and determinations that were later reversed, as well as the need for more aggressive land use expertise given

upcoming development issues. He advocated for exploring alternatives while noting that current counsel has served well in many areas.

Commissioner Hawkins expressed confidence in current counsel, particularly noting Sasha Garcia's responsiveness and historical knowledge of city matters. He worried about appearing disjointed by making too many leadership changes simultaneously.

Vice Mayor Ashcraft supported exploring options for potential cost savings, similar to the recent city manager search process.

Commissioner Holland emphasized the need for regular evaluations, noting that the city has not conducted formal reviews of the attorney in sixteen years, despite the mayor's repeated requests for such evaluations.

City Attorney Garcia addressed the commission, stating her willingness to receive feedback and commitment to smooth transition if the commission chose another direction. She requested that any evaluation meetings include a third party since she is not a city employee.

After extensive discussion, the commission reached consensus to implement immediate attorney evaluations with each commissioner meeting individually with Garcia (accompanied by city management), followed by a six-month review to determine future direction.

8. Future Agenda Items and Comments

8.1 City Commission

Commissioner Holland requested a full forensic audit of the finance department, citing the need for clean books before transitioning to new city management and ensuring transparency given potential legislative changes affecting property taxes. Finance Director Lori Carr noted such audits are extremely expensive, though specific costs weren't determined.

Commissioner Holland also thanked the African American Heritage Committee for their excellent work and the City for George Fest. In closing, he expressed gratitude to departing City Manager Carrino for his leadership.

Commissioner Asbate confirmed that the consultant agreement with Levy is nearly complete and that the Downtown Workshop is scheduled for April 7th from 1:00 to 3:00 PM. He also expressed appreciation for City Manager Carrino's years of service, acknowledging they had differences but appreciating his commitment to the community.

Commissioner Hawkins echoed praise for both the Heritage Festival and George Fest, noting that despite being short-staffed and in Cheri Moan's first year managing events, the department "knocked it out of the park." He commended the police department's response to the armed individual incident during the festival, noting their professional handling of the situation and fair treatment of the troubled young man.

Commissioner Hawkins also thanked City Manager Carrino for being "a great city manager" and "the calm in the storm," appreciating his honesty, thoughtfulness, and service to the city.

Vice Mayor Ashcraft raised several items: requesting serious discussion about taking over Lakeshore Drive from the county due to ongoing citizen concerns; his work with Lake County and Greater Orlando Sports Commission to bring Major League Fishing to Eustis, which requires facility evaluation including installation of lighting at the boat ramp; suggesting cross-training between parks and recreation and events departments for emergency coverage during big events; and promoting the upcoming Shamrockin' Fest downtown event on March 13th and 14th.

8.2 City Manager

City Manager Carrino highlighted the upcoming Amazing Race event on March 21st, requiring staff to quickly pivot from George Fest. He expressed thoughts for Events Director, Cheri Moan during this difficult time with her father passing. City Manager Carrino thanked all departments for their George Fest contributions and announced next year's 125th George Fest theme: "Buck and a Quarter," playing on George Washington's presence on both the dollar bill and quarter.

8.3 City Attorney

City Attorney Garcia thanked the commission for their time deliberating and expressed her looking forward to hearing from each commissioner on how to better serve them.

8.4 Mayor

Mayor Lee offered condolences to Cheri Moan on her father's death and its particularly difficult timing. She thanked Tim Howard for refreshing flowers throughout the city using plants grown in the city's greenhouse, and Lee and Michelle from Public Works for refreshing butterfly signs and installing one at the Methodist Church for their planned monarch garden. She praised the events department for George Fest success, noting appreciation for Saturday night's band, and commended the large Heritage Festival parade. Mayor Lee thanked City Manager Carrino as a "servant leader" who led while serving the city and its citizens well, acknowledging the personal sacrifices he and his family made for city service.

9. Adjournment: 8:13 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. If available, the video recording may be accessible at <https://www.youtube.com/@EustisComRel/streams> or an audio recording may be requested from the office of the City Clerk.*

CHRISTINE HALLORAN
City Clerk

EMILY A. LEE
Mayor/Commissioner