



MINUTES

City Commission Workshop: Downtown Master Plan Review

1:00 PM – Tuesday, April 07, 2026 – City Hall

Call to Order: 1:06 p.m.

Acknowledgement of Quorum and Proper Notice

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

ABSENT: Commissioner Michael Holland

Workshop Item with Discussion and Direction:

Interim City Manager Rick Gierok opened the meeting by explaining this was part of an ongoing effort to move from planning into implementation.

Dr. Levey acknowledged that the first two master plan workshops really evolved because we have now moved beyond planning, and we are now moving into action and implementation. Moving forward, he would refer to this effort as implementation rather than planning.

Briefly recapping, the first two workshops established clear priorities. We introduced a preliminary program management framework for downtown, with three priority areas. They were at a \$200,000 figure, but that number will be updated based on what is presented today. Building on that foundation, we are providing more detailed information for each project while reinforcing how these efforts are interconnected and collectively support the vision for a vibrant downtown waterfront. We will begin introducing financing concepts and funding strategies, and most importantly, they will be seeking the commissions direction on key decisions moving forward. As before, we will ask for input throughout. At the previous workshop meetings, the commission gave clear directions, which helped them to move quickly. At the next workshop they will come back with additional analysis to support today's decisions.

Everything being presented today will cover roughly thirty days of hard work. The team was only re-engaged about a month ago, so this reflects a significant effort in a short period of time. We have assembled a strong team and tasked them with developing more detailed project options and cost estimates. The goal today is to walk through those options and leave with further direction so they can refine and return with more specific recommendations on financing and implementation. Throughout the presentation you will identify a tiered graphic symbol, which indicates points where we are specifically seeking guidance. The focus today will be on the capital projects the commission had identified as priorities. While economic development and operational initiatives remain important, they would not be covering those today because they were assuming they would continue to move forward in parallel.

With that, beginning with the county trail plan there are two primary options under consideration for the north lake trail. A rail-based alignment and an alternative route if acquisition of the rail corridor is not feasible. The corridor would connect Tavares to Eustis and Eustis to Umatilla, with the primary focus being the segment through Eustis. In general, the rails-to-trails conversions are ideal because they offer direct routes and strong user appeal, but they are also the most expensive and often the

most complex to implement. Recognizing this, the consultants developed an alternative alignment to ensure connectivity regardless of rail acquisition. Both options would significantly benefit downtown by bringing trail users through the area, increasing activity, visibility, and economic opportunity. Whether the rail corridor or the alternative route, having downtown directly connected to the trail network is a major advantage. Currently, the project remains in the feasibility stage, and they are requesting feedback from the city within the next few days. While this may be their first time seeing this level of detail, today presents a valuable opportunity to share initial thoughts so they can help ensure alignment among the cities and the county as this effort moves forward.

Dr. Levey explained that the regional trail project remains in its early concept and feasibility stage, with the consultant's continuing analysis of three cities and the county to eventually recommend a preferred alignment around September 2026, after which the project would move into a PD&E study to pursue funding. He emphasized that this is a long-term effort with significant potential benefits for the downtown area. He noted that the city has already funded its participation, so there are no new financial implications at this stage. While both the railroad corridor and an alternate route are under consideration, he acknowledged that the railroad option may be more desirable but will ultimately depend on cost and timing.

Vice Mayor Ashcraft wanted to know who was leading the discussions with the railroad. Noting that rail companies have been more cooperative on other trail segments and questioned why north-south coordination might differ. Public Utilities Director, Greg Dobbins responded that the responsibility is shared among the cities Tavares, Mount Dora, and Umatilla as well as the county. Commissioner Ashcraft raised the importance of involving the public land trust, given its role in previous rail acquisitions, and suggested ensuring county coordination with that group.

Mayor Lee asked about prior rail purchases. Public Utilities Director Dobbins clarified that Tavares had acquired a piece running eastward to Mount Dora. Commissioner Asbate expressed support for continuing the effort despite unknowns, stressing the importance of achieving the best economic impact and improving mobility for residents. Vice Mayor Ashcraft reiterated the importance of connectivity. Commissioner Hawkins emphasized that cost would be the deciding factor for him, stating that if an alternate route delivers similar results at a lower price, it will make more sense, provided the trail still runs through downtown. Mayor Lee inquired whether rail companies have become more open to negotiations, and Public Utilities Director Dobbins said it was still too early to know. Commissioner Hawkins noted that new railroad leadership may be more willing to engage. Dr. Levey added that he and staff would further investigate issues related to railroad ownership and the public land trust and he would report back at a future workshop.

Commissioner Hawkins questioned whether smaller local segments could be built sooner if the alternate route is chosen. Dr. Levey explained that phased construction is possible, and the city could begin with smaller connector pieces such as links to the downtown or areas like Sunset Park that would integrate into the larger system later. He mentioned that a preliminary estimate of about \$7.5 million has been included in long-range planning for the city's share, though costs remain uncertain, particularly regarding right-of-way acquisition, and future analysis may show the alternate route to be more cost-effective and quicker to deliver.

Commissioner Asbate asked whether the proposed alternative route would run through the roadway or require taking private property. Interim City Manager Gierok responded that it would be within the roadway area. Dr. Levey clarified that the intention was for it to be within the city's right-of-way (not necessarily where cars drive), although a detailed analysis has not yet been completed. Public Utilities Director Dobbins confirmed that further evaluation of the right-of-way will be done soon. The commission acknowledged uncertainty about whether trails would replace sidewalks or use adjacent space, and that more technical review was needed.

Dr. Levey presented a broader city trail plan, explaining that it comes from the downtown master plan and it is designed to connect neighborhoods to the downtown like spokes to a hub. He outlined five priority trails and emphasized that these are initial recommendations, with preliminary cost estimates totaling just over \$4.75 million. He noted that the plan has been advanced internally to save cost and time, and the commission's role is to confirm or adjust the priority order before moving forward into feasibility studies, public input, and eventually incorporation into the city's comprehensive plan.

Public Utilities Director Dobbins and Interim City Manager Gierok explained the reasoning behind the rankings. McDonald Avenue trail is considered the highest priority because it directly connects the east side of the city to the downtown. The Ward/Washington trail is next, linking it to Sunset Park, which is expected to play a key role in the downtown plan. Prescott serves as a connector between major routes, while the Country Club trail extends access towards other parts of the city. The Lake Gracie trail is ranked lowest because it is more recreational and less critical for moving people into the downtown.

Commissioner Asbate raised concerns about the ranking, particularly the Lake Gracie area and the southern portion of the city appear to be underserved. He argued that this area has significant population density and potentially higher-income residents who would benefit from better connectivity to the downtown. He suggested reevaluating priorities using demographic data and ensuring that southern neighborhoods are not overlooked.

Public Utilities Director Dobbins responded that the five trails are only part of a larger system of about sixteen planned routes. He explained that some southern connections are intended to tie into a future county trail system rather than directly into downtown, which is why they were not prioritized here. However, both he and Interim City Manager Gierok acknowledged that the map may not clearly show the connections and additional routes or adjustments could be considered.

Commissioner Hawkins asked about the timeline for completing the trails. Dr. Levey explained that timing depends on funding, but with sufficient resources, all five priority trails could potentially be completed within two to four years. He reiterated that the current discussion is about setting priorities and direction, not making final funding decisions, and agreed that staff should revisit gaps in the southern area before moving forward.

Mayor Lee asked whether the county trail system being referenced would adequately serve the southern part of the city. Public Utilities Director Dobbins explained that the county trail does extend up from the south and that some local trails are designed to connect into it, ultimately leading people back into downtown.

Commissioner Asbate argued that the county trail, especially near the rail line and areas west of State Road 19 serves a very different area than neighborhoods like the Gables. He emphasized that those areas are not equivalent in terms of accessibility or population. He suggested that prioritization should be based on how many people benefit, not just cost or ease of construction. He proposed evaluating trails based on return of investment, meaning the number of residents who could realistically use them to access downtown. He then suggested phasing projects like the McDonald Avenue trail to focus first on the segments with the highest population density.

Dr. Levey agreed it was a fair point and said the team can return with a more detailed justification for each trail based on criteria like population impact and cost-effectiveness. Vice Mayor Ashcraft added that while maximizing impact is important, the city should not overlook the strategic value of building local trails because doing so can help secure outside funding, particularly from the regional planning organization (MPO). Demonstrating commitment to local infrastructure could strengthen applications for larger funding sources.

Commissioner Asbate clarified that he supported all the trails but stressed the importance of sequencing them to achieve the greatest immediate impact, especially to help activate downtown and waterfront areas. He reiterated that the city should prioritize projects that bring the most people into downtown earlier, rather than simply choosing the easiest or cheapest options. Dr. Levey acknowledged that there may be significant portions of the city not currently well connected in the plan and suggested expanding the analysis to include additional routes. The goal would be to evaluate how each neighborhood could most effectively connect to downtown sooner rather than later. Drawing on an example from another city, Commissioner Asbate described how focusing on a dense, middle-income area first led to strong early success for a trail system. He argued that Eustis should take a similar approach targeting high-density areas to quickly generate usage and momentum. He noted the potential for people to drive to parks like Bennett Park and use trails from there, further increasing impact.

Vice Mayor Ashcraft wanted to build on this idea by suggesting areas like Trout Lake as additional access points where people might park and enter the trail system. The discussion expanded to include both northern and southern parts of the city, with some commissioners noting various residential concentrations that should be considered. Deputy City Manager. Miranda Burrows explained that while additional trail connections do exist particularly toward Trout Lake the current plan was intentionally focused on routes that feed directly into the downtown. However, she recognized that the commission wants a broader view, including all possible connections and supporting data.

Commissioner Asbate reiterated the core priority maximizing impact with available funding, especially early on, in case resources become limited. He emphasized the need to “energize the best, not the easiest” projects first. Interim City Manager Gierok acknowledged that the city has not yet analyzed trail priorities based on population impact but confirmed that this can be done using GIS data. He agreed that this is a valuable direction and commits to incorporating that analysis moving forward.

Dr. Levey transitioned the discussion to the waterfront, focusing on the historic bandshell. He described it as an iconic and beloved feature but explained that it has limitations particularly its inability to support larger performances like orchestras, theatrical productions, or modern stage setups. He noted that a recent Georgefest demonstrated a temporary stage expansion that successfully accommodated bigger events at a relatively low cost, suggesting strong potential. Based on this, he proposed a permanent stage expansion (estimated around \$400,000) and encouraged the commission to think bigger potentially transforming the bandshell into a regional venue that could attract major acts and drive nighttime economic activity downtown. He recommended both moving forward with preliminary design and conducting a broader “peer analysis” of similar venues across Florida. Mayor Lee supported the idea and pointed to the Walt Disney Amphitheater as a successful example, noting its ability to host concerts and performances. Dr. Levey responded that sponsorship opportunities, like those seen there, could be explored in Eustis, along with other enhancements such as seating and facility upgrades.

Commissioner Hawkins agreed there is strong potential, stating that events like Georgefest show Eustis could become a unique destination in the region. Dr. Levey suggested that the city could eventually develop a full event calendar like a performing arts venue, attracting visitors and boosting local business. Commissioner Asbate brought up past experience, referencing efforts to attract Ace Cafe to downtown Eustis. He explained that the efforts failed partly because the bandshell could not be enclosed or partitioned to allow ticketed events, which are necessary to attract larger, revenue-generating performances. He emphasized that any future design should consider ways to allow ticketing and controlled access, even if only temporarily. He cited successful models in other cities where outdoor venues can be partially enclosed for paid events. Dr. Levey agreed that flexibility will be key allowing both free public events and ticketed performances. He noted that achieving this balance will likely require design changes to the venue and surrounding park.

Events and Communication Director, Cheri Moan supported the expansion and explained current logistical challenges, including limited stage space, safety concerns, and insufficient room for modern production equipment. She highlighted additional needs such as better loading/unloading areas, parking for buses, multiple “green rooms” for performers, improved backstage and support facilities. She suggested that temporary fencing or VIP areas could allow for ticketed experiences while keeping the park generally open. She proposed exploring both public and private sector models and consulting with promoters to understand what attracts larger acts. Mayor Lee added that expanding the stage must also include upgrading facilities for performers, such as changing areas and restrooms. Cheri Moan agreed and went further, floating a larger vision potentially integrating an event center behind the bandshell that could support both community and ticketed events while preserving the historic structure.

Commissioner Asbate strongly supported expansion but reiterated the importance of “thinking big” combining public investment with private-sector partnerships and ticketed events to maximize impact and bring more people downtown. Dr. Levey stated that there is a tremendous opportunity and confirmed the next steps which proceed with preliminary stage design while conducting a broader analysis to develop a bigger vision for the bandshell. Commissioner Asbate said he would like to review more information. Dr. Levey recommended a possible location near the Girl Scout House. Interim City Manager Gierok clarified that landmarks like the Girl Scout House and bridge club could have concerns with lightning alerts and speaker systems, highlighting it a practical consideration for pool placement and operations.

Dr. Levey wanted to revisit the broader concept of a two-pool strategy, one smaller community pool and one larger competitive facility. Commissioner Asbate responded that his priority is building on the Carver Park master plan, emphasizing that decisions should be driven by usage data, return on investment, and who will use the facilities (schools, recreation programs, competitions). He argued that the city should focus on maximizing impact and economic return rather than convenience or ease of placement. Commissioner Hawkins agreed that the larger pool should be designed for competitive use, including county and high school competitions, and noted that Eustis could fill a regional gap since nearby communities currently travel to Clermont for similar facilities. This reinforces the idea that a competitive pool could serve a wider regional audience. Mayor Lee added that facilities should help attract people into different parts of the city and introduce them to local areas. Commissioner Hawkins further noted that some existing pool locations do not serve residential neighborhoods well and suggested that relocating could improve accessibility and community benefit.

Interim City Manager Gierok explained that Sunset Island would be better suited for a smaller community-oriented pool, while Carver Park would function better as a larger athletic complex with broader regional appeal. He described Carver as a stronger candidate for expansion due to existing sports facilities and space for additional development, although he noted that current usage patterns may be shifting. Commissioner Asbate supported this direction and argued strongly that the city’s “brand” and long-term vision point toward Carver Park as the site for the major pool facility. He suggested that Sunset Park may face resistance due to its residential proximity and instead proposed that Carver Park should host the larger, “signature” facility, potentially integrated with future trail connections and park expansion. Vice Mayor Ashcraft agreed that the Carver Park master plan should be fully considered before finalizing pool placement, emphasizing the importance of aligning major investments with long-term park planning. Mayor Lee added that a competitive facility would require additional infrastructure to support visiting teams, spectators, and events. Commissioner Hawkins reiterated the importance of moving forward with at least one smaller pool first to maintain services while planning the larger facility.

Commissioner Asbate suggested a phased strategy to build the larger competitive pool at Carver Park first, since it has space, fewer residential conflicts, and stronger economic potential. He proposed that a smaller community pool could be added later at Sunset Park or another site as

population grows. He introduced the idea of integrating the pool system with trail networks, noting that trail-connected amenities could significantly increase usage and regional draw. Interim City Manager Gierok confirmed that proposed trail alignments would connect both Carver Park and Sunset Park, strengthening access and reinforcing the idea of linking recreation hubs to the citywide trail system.

Mayor Lee asked about revenue generation, specifically whether organizations hosting competitions would pay to use the pool. Commissioner Hawkins confirmed that rental fees would apply to organizations using the facility. Dr. Levey clarified that while events may generate revenue, operating costs would not be fully covered by those fees alone. Commissioner Asbate added that sponsorships and regional events could help offset costs indirectly by increasing tourism and hotel stays, even if the city does not directly recover full expenses. Mayor Lee suggested the idea of naming the new facility as part of the project. Dr. Levey summarized the direction, noting concern about Sunset Park and asked whether the commission generally supported a small pool first and a large pool second sequencing approach. Commissioner Asbate questioned whether the current facility was even considered for a large pool and emphasized that a truly large, competitive pool in Carver Park could significantly transform the city by attracting competitions and regional events. He reiterated support for a phased approach but stressed the importance of selecting the right first location.

Vice Mayor Ashcraft and Commissioner Hawkins both supported the idea that a large pool at Carver Park could serve dual purposes hosting competitive events while functioning as a community amenity when not in use for tournaments. They noted that the broader Carver Park master plan likely includes recreation facilities such as slides and other features, reinforcing its suitability as a major recreational hub. Mayor Lee asked about connectivity, noting that the pool would ideally connect to the city's trail system. Commissioner Hawkins confirmed, and Dr. Levey added that the McDonald Avenue trail was identified as a top priority and would directly connect Carver Park area to downtown, strengthening the value of that location. Commissioner Asbate clarified that while he understands the statistical reasoning for a two-pool strategy, the commission is still determining which site should come first. He emphasized that sequencing and location are still open questions, especially given the broader community impact. Dr. Levey responded that the city's working assumption is to have an Olympic-sized competitive pool at Carver Park as a long-term vision, with a smaller community pool potentially coming later. He explained that the intent of the current strategy is to accelerate downtown activation while relocating the existing pool but acknowledge that the location for the smaller pool still needed refinement. He then noted that multiple pools should be spaced geographically rather than clustered too closely together and suggested additional site evaluation may be needed.

Vice Mayor Ashcraft raised the possibility of reclaiming previously allocated land from Lake-Sumter State College if it is not being used, suggesting it could be a potential pool site. Interim City Manager Gierok responded that the project is currently still active through an Economic Development Administration grant process. Commissioner Hawkins noted that no matter where the pool is placed, some level of neighborhood impact and pushbacks are likely, particularly regarding noise and activity. He acknowledged that Carver Park would not be free of concern from nearby residents.

Mayor Lee asked for clarification on where exactly a new pool would be located and how long the transition would take, including how long the city would be without a pool during construction. Dr. Levey explained that once a location is selected, design could begin immediately and a new pool could potentially be completed within three years, depending on funding. He added that the plan includes demolishing the existing downtown pool and repurposing that space for future waterfront development, creating a sequence of connected projects. Mayor Lee noted that relocating the pool will likely generate public pushback, particularly from those concerned about losing the downtown facility. Interim City Manager Gierok explained that the Sunset Park site is not fully residential in character, but still has nearby homes and sensitive uses, requiring community outreach like past projects.

Commissioner Hawkins observed that the current downtown pool has not generated significant noise complaints, likely due to its commercial surroundings and buffering. Commissioner Asbate agreed, emphasizing that Sunset Park would present more challenges due to residential proximity, limited road access, and parking constraints. He argued that Carver Park is a stronger long-term solution due to its scale, buffer space, and ability to handle larger regional events and traffic. Mayor Lee asked about the current pool usage and whether data has been collected. Commissioner Hawkins responded that usage typically increases in the summer and implies that tracking attendance would be useful for future planning decisions.

Commissioner Asbate raised concerns about the feasibility of the Sunset Park location for a smaller pool, noting its limited square footage, proximity to residential areas, traffic constraints, and the challenge of adding buses and parking. He questioned whether it makes sense to cram facilities into that site and suggested the need to evaluate other possible locations, including whether enough land exists near the service center or elsewhere. He emphasized long-term planning, suggesting the city should consider a five-to-fifty-year outlook and include growing areas like Grand Island in future recreation planning. Interim City Manager Gierok responded that the available area near the service center is very limited and would not accommodate the footprint of the existing pool, confirming that Sunset Park would only support a smaller-scale facility if that site were chosen.

Dr. Levey summarized the discussion and proposed next steps: staff will provide commissioners with detailed site information on Sunset Park, including fit, parking, and operational constraints. He suggested continuing to evaluate Carver Park as the potential site for a larger competitive pool consistent with the master plan, while exploring whether alternative locations exist for a smaller community pool. He noted that the priority is first identifying a relocation site for the existing pool, then refining broader options. Commissioner Asbate added that the city should consider a smaller pool in the growing Grand Island area, given long-term population growth and increasing tax base there. He supported Carver Park as the primary location for a large competitive pool but suggested the city may ultimately need multiple facilities across different areas of the city. Dr. Levey asked whether some newer neighborhoods already include HOA pools, and Commissioner Asbate confirmed that many do, though he reiterated that growth in those areas still justify consideration of public facilities.

Dr. Levey moved to the next discussion next topic: dock expansion along the waterfront. He explained that a previously proposed \$2 million dock project near the chamber building intended partly for seaplane access should move forward only in terms of permitting at this time, not construction. He proposed pausing major investment while the city conducts a broader analysis of downtown waterfront capacity, including boat docks, mooring, and shoreline use. He recommended coming back in about sixty days with a comprehensive waterfront concept plan. Vice Mayor Ashcraft questioned whether proceeding with permitting before fully understanding the long-term shoreline plan may be premature. He emphasized the need to preserve waterfront views and carefully consider how dock placement could affect events and public access. Dr. Levey responded that the intent was not to finalize design decisions yet, but to understand the overall capacity and options before committing to construction. He agreed that shoreline design will significantly influence dock placement decisions.

Commissioner Asbate stressed the importance of balancing docks, views, and event space, noting that all waterfront uses must work together cohesively. He mentioned prior interest in seaplane access proposals and suggested coordination with private sector partners. Interim City Manager Gierok confirmed that seaplane-related discussions are already in progress with engineers and private applicants. Vice Mayor Ashcraft reiterated that waterfront expansion, promenade development, and event programming must all be considered together before committing significant funds. Dr. Levey explained that the city was moving toward a comprehensive waterfront master plan that will integrate earlier discussions about docks, shoreline use, and downtown economic development. He emphasized that the goal was not simply to proceed with a previously proposed

dock permit, but to evaluate the full capacity of the waterfront and how it can best support downtown activity and long-term economic growth.

Dr. Levey shifted focus to the community center, referencing the downtown master plan's suggestion for a potential new facility. He explained that staff analyzed the existing building's usage in detail, categorizing events into civic meetings, civic banquets, and private rentals such as weddings. The data shows the facility hosts about one hundred and seventy-nine events per year, generating roughly \$90,000 annually, with average group sizes around one hundred and fifty people and peak events reaching up to three hundred and fifty attendees. He emphasized that while the facility does not operate at a financial profit consistent with most public buildings it provides a significant community service and is used almost every other day. He continued to explain that although revenue is modest, understanding the building's P&L (profit and loss) is still important for evaluating subsidies and long-term planning. He noted that the current facility is about 9,500 square feet, with occupancy limited by life safety codes, not just physical space. He outlined that maintaining the existing building would require approximately \$400,000 in repairs, potentially extending its life by five to seven years. He presented several long-term options for the community center: maintaining and repairing the existing building, constructing a new facility estimated at \$4 to \$5 million, or pursuing a public-private partnership, such as incorporating the facility into a hotel or redevelopment project. He noted that while private development could reduce public costs, it may be difficult given the limited revenue the facility generates. He stressed that regardless of the option chosen, the city must preserve the ability to accommodate the approximately one hundred and eighty annual community events, which are essential to civic life. If redevelopment occurs, those events will need to be temporarily relocated during construction. He discussed an unsolicited private development proposal currently under consideration, recommending that the city formally review it and determine whether to proceed with an RFP process, decline it, or modify it. He emphasized that any acceptable solution must balance redevelopment goals such as hotels and economic activity with continued access to event space. Staff will evaluate the proposal further and return with recommendations, ensuring that any future plan preserves the community center's core function while supporting downtown redevelopment and economic growth.

Interim City Manager Gierok clarified the status of the community center roof project, noting there is still about \$350,000 budgeted for it. He explained that the figure is based on a preliminary estimate and the city would still go out to a formal competitive bidding process before any work is done. Dr. Levey asked the commission for clear directions whether to proceed with or defer the roof replacement while emphasizing the need to understand the broader strategy for the community center before investing further. Commissioner Hawkins supported moving forward with the roof replacement, stating that the building currently shows visible wear and tear and does not reflect well on the community. He argued that improvements are needed regardless of future plans, since the facility will continue operating for some time. Commissioner Asbate said he was not ready to approve or reject the roof repair yet. He argued the commission needed more information about the long-term plan for the facility, including whether it will be relocated, replaced, or privately redeveloped. He compares the decision to previous short-term investments made in facilities that were later demolished, expressing concern about spending money without clarity on the building's future.

Mayor Lee questioned the cost estimate, noting she has a figure closer to \$250,000, and asked how many bids were received. Interim City Manager Gierok explained that the number is based on a budgetary estimate, and no bids have been received yet because the project has not gone out to market. He confirmed the roof is significantly deteriorated, with multiple existing layers already beyond recommended limits. Dr. Levey suggested a combined approach to move forward with the bidding process for the roof while evaluating the private-sector redevelopment proposal. He emphasized that regardless of ownership or future redevelopment, the function of the community center must be preserved, even if its location or structure changes. Commissioner Asbate noted that

the community center has strong economic development potential if leveraged properly. He argued that with the right public-private partnership, the facility could attract more regional events, increase tourism, and support future hotel development. He sees the building not just as a civic space, but as a potential destination venue for larger events currently held in other cities. Vice Mayor Ashcraft agreed that any future facility should be large enough to serve both community needs and larger regional events. Mayor Lee added that the city already hosts events like sheriff gatherings and galas but lacks a venue large enough to accommodate them locally.

Commissioner Asbate emphasized the opportunity for Eustis to become a regional event hub, arguing that capturing this market would bring economic benefits and reduce the need for residents to travel to nearby cities for large gatherings. He suggested that a redesigned or relocated facility should include provisions for discounted community use while supporting revenue-generating private events. Dr. Levey acknowledged the potential but noted uncertainty around how actively the facility is currently marketed and suggested that a new strategy may be needed to maximize its use and value. Mayor Lee asked whether a temporary or alternative site would be needed to maintain community services if the current facility is relocated or redeveloped. Commissioner Hawkins agreed that continuity of service is essential and that another location would be required during any transition. Vice Mayor Ashcraft added that the city may need to reevaluate existing facilities to determine whether any could temporarily or permanently accommodate community center functions. Commissioner Asbate said it would not be the end of the world if the city went through a short period without the existing facility during redevelopment, noting that demolition and construction timelines could still leave an eighteen-month gap. He emphasized the need to think long term, suggesting that the site may not need to remain on prime waterfront property and raising the question of whether other city-owned or future-acquired sites could better serve events like weddings, HOA gatherings, and birthdays. He raised the idea of considering broader geographic options and questioned whether the city should be planning for a fifty-to-seventy-five-year facility rather than making short-term decisions. Commissioner Hawkins stated he never felt the facility necessarily had to remain in its current location but emphasized the importance of ensuring residents still have access to an event space regardless of where it is relocated.

Mayor Lee suggested exploring alternative locations such as the fairgrounds as a temporary or even long-term solution for hosting events if the current site is redeveloped. She mentioned other potential interim venues, including churches and community facilities, while acknowledging that some of these options may lack full amenities like kitchens or be limited in capacity. Commissioner Asbate noted that some alternative facilities, such as churches or civic centers, may help bridge the gap but would not fully replace a dedicated events venue. He pointed out that redevelopment timelines could extend several years and reiterated that planning should consider both short-term disruption and long-term opportunity.

Dr. Levey summarized the direction as proceeding with obtaining competitive pricing for roof repairs and maintenance while simultaneously evaluating an unsolicited private-sector proposal for redevelopment. He emphasized maintaining the functionality of the community center throughout any transition. He explained that broader property acquisition and waterfront planning efforts are ongoing and consistent with the city's existing master plan. Regarding downtown development, he referenced a market study suggesting demand for a sixty-to-eighty room hotel with approximately 15,000 square feet of event space, and the city should test this demand through private-sector engagement. He stressed that maintaining community event functions is essential regardless of the redevelopment approach and recommended evaluating the unsolicited proposal before deciding whether to proceed with it, issue an RFP, or wait for better market conditions.

Commissioner Asbate raised concerns about parking capacity in relation to downtown events, noting that recent festivals such as the Shamrock Festival and Japanese Festival created significant congestion. He explained that parking areas, including vacant lots and overflow spaces, filled to

capacity extending as far as Hazard Avenue. He stressed that any future hotel or major development must include dedicated parking and should not rely on existing public lots or park spaces. He emphasized that parking demand will continue to grow as downtown programming expands. Mayor Lee added that in similar urban settings, such as Orlando, parking is often monetized, referencing the idea of charging for event parking. He noted that such approaches had been previously proposed but may face public resistance.

Dr. Levey responded that parking will inevitably become a critical issue as downtown development succeeds. He framed the challenge as a planning tradeoff between building enough parking for peak event demand versus designing for typical daily usage. He confirmed that future private development, such as hotels or mixed-use projects, would be expected to provide their own parking, though there may be opportunities for the city to collaborate on shared parking structures to support downtown capacity. Shifting discussions to the waterfront implementation plan, he explained transitioning from a static master plan toward a more iterative, implementation-focused approach. Instead of producing one fixed long-term plan, the city would update a living plan that evolves as individual project decisions are made. His team would create updated graphics to reflect how each decision such as the bandshell, trails, boat docks, community center, and other projects impact the overall waterfront vision. He noted that while seawalls had not been a major feature of previous planning, the team would now evaluate whether limited seawall development could enhance waterfront access, boat docking capacity, and shoreline usability. He emphasized that the city's existing waterfront design, including its promenade and cantilevered edges, would be re-evaluated alongside potential future property acquisitions.

Interim City Manager Gierok added that the city already owns key shoreline areas, including land along the tracks and the water's edge, which could be leveraged for future improvements. He suggested that focusing on the western side of the property could significantly enhance the lakefront experience, potentially creating a continuous "lake walk" and integrating the waterfront more fully into downtown redevelopment plans.

Dr. Levey emphasized that the city's waterfront and downtown vision should "think big" and not exclude major opportunities. He explained that the team will continue updating the waterfront implementation plan as individual project decisions are made, providing revised versions at each workshop to reflect progress and direction. He summarized the overall program, noting that many of the cost estimates presented are still preliminary and will change as plans are refined. He confirmed that preliminary design work on the bandshell expansion would move forward, while recommending additional financial advisory support to evaluate the complexity of the private-sector proposal and broader capital strategy. He reviewed the major project cost categories: approximately \$7.5 million for trail-related improvements (subject to change), about \$4.75 million for city trail components, roughly \$400,000 for bandshell improvements and preliminary design, and an unresolved cost for the community pool depending on location and design. He noted that dock and seawall expansion costs have not yet been determined and will be developed through further analysis. For the community center, he reiterated the \$400,000 maintenance option versus a potential \$4 to \$5 million replacement or redevelopment scenario, possibly through a private partnership. He highlighted a \$12 million placeholder for property acquisition tied to long-term waterfront and downtown development goals. The overall program could total roughly \$30 million but that figure is flexible and will be refined. He outlined that funding would not need to be secured all at once and could be structured in phases or tranches to reduce financial strain on the city. He noted that financial advisors experienced in municipal finance could help structure funding strategies, evaluate public-private partnerships, and support long-term fiscal planning, including cash management and multi-year forecasting. He recommended that the city formally consider retaining financial advisory services to help structure and evaluate the full implementation plan. He emphasized that the goal is to refine project scopes,

align financing strategies, and return to the commission later in the year with a cohesive, actionable financial plan.

Commissioner Asbate closed by expressing strong appreciation for the work being done by staff and consultants, describing it as priceless and an investment in the city's long-term future. He is highly optimistic about the direction of the city's development, praising leadership and staff energy, and emphasized that well-planned, smart debt is appropriate when investing in long-term infrastructure and land. He stated that these investments will create a legacy for future generations.

Vice Mayor Ashcraft agreed, commending the speed and quality of the planning effort and acknowledging the significant amount of progress made in a short time. He reflected on past missed opportunities, noting frustration that earlier action had not been taken, but emphasized moving forward constructively.

Mayor Lee shared positive observations from recent downtown events, noting visitors from out of state who traveled specifically to attend festivals and events. She highlighted strong public feedback, increased tourism interest, and the appeal of downtown attractions such as public art installations. She described the city as having strong untapped potential and expressed optimism that continued development would significantly increase visitation and economic activity. Dr. Levey responded that the team intends to maintain momentum by returning to the commission every sixty to ninety days with updates. Progress depends on continued leadership direction and collaboration. He stated that multiple initiatives can move forward simultaneously because the city has the internal capacity to advance several projects in parallel, provided financing and planning align. He stressed the importance of moving forward once decisions are ready rather than waiting for every element to be fully resolved.

Commissioner Hawkins said he was eager to see tangible progress and identify which projects will serve as catalysts for downtown redevelopment. He emphasized the importance of aligning all efforts toward the shared goal of attracting visitors and investment. Dr. Levey agreed, stating that multiple projects can and should proceed in parallel when ready. Waiting for a single perfect catalyst is unnecessary and that incremental progress across several projects will collectively strengthen downtown. He reiterated the importance of having a structured financing plan in place to support implementation. Commissioner Hawkins highlighted that the introduction of a formal financing strategy increased confidence in the plan, noting it signaled seriousness and commitment. Interim City Manager Gierok reinforced that staff had begun exploring financing options following prior concerns about funding feasibility. He described the recent coordination with financial experts as productive and noted that it confirmed the plan is actionable rather than aspirational.

Mayor Lee concluded by expressing that, for the first time, the commission and staff are unified in purpose and direction. She emphasized the importance of maintaining that shared focus and continuing collaborative momentum moving forward.

2. Adjournment: 3:23 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