

CITY OF GREEN COVE SPRINGS CITY COUNCIL SPECIAL SESSION

321 WALNUT STREET, GREEN COVE SPRINGS, FLORIDA
THURSDAY, OCTOBER 02, 2025 – 6:00 PM



MINUTES

Invocation & Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag – **Mayor Johnson**

Roll Call

COUNCIL MEMBERS PRESENT: Mayor Matt Johnson, Vice Mayor Ed Gaw (Arrived at 6:09), Council Member Glee Glisson, Council Member Cheryl Starnes, Council Member Darren Stutts

STAFF MEMBERS PRESENT: L.J. Arnold, III, City Attorney, Steve Kennedy, City Manager, Mike Null, Assistant City Manager, Erin West, City Clerk

Mayor to call on members of the audience wishing to address the Council on matters not on the Agenda.

Mayor Johnson thanked City Manager Steve Kennedy for his seven years of service to Green Cove Springs and 48 years in public service overall. He spoke about Mr. Kennedy's leadership, work ethic, and ability to empower his staff.

1. Kim Evans 631 St. Johns Ave. GCS thanked everyone serving the city and advised she was confused about the meeting agenda and wanted to wait to comment until she better understood the discussion.
2. Daniel Vallencourt 326 Walnut St. GCS spoke in support of City Manager Steve Kennedy. He spoke about Mr. Kennedy's strong management, leadership, and the significant progress made under his direction. He urged the city to continue Mr. Kennedy's direction, enforce code, and address neglected properties to maintain business confidence and growth.
3. Valerie Kelley 101 Park St. GCS spoke about the importance of valuing and fairly compensating city employees. She spoke about her experience as a business owner and advised that staff thrive when respected and properly paid. She spoke about some council members seeming out of touch with modern pay standards and warned that undervaluing skilled professionals risks the city's progress.
4. Steven Kelley 101 Park St. GCS quoted Theodore Roosevelt's "Man in the Arena" and stressed that real leadership requires courage, humility, and accountability. He questioned why the council was being swayed by social media and misinformation instead of facts and staff expertise. He spoke about Mr. Kennedy's leadership and listed major improvements around the city. He encouraged the council to lead responsibly and avoid undermining progress with divisiveness or scapegoating.
5. Felicia Hampshire 508 Franklin St. GCS advised her concern and confusion about the purpose of the meeting and sensed rising contention within the community. She thanked Mr. Kennedy for his accomplishments and respect for employees. She encouraged stability, civility, and unity, urging everyone to avoid relying on social media rumors.

COUNCIL BUSINESS

1. Discussion Requested by Council Member Stutts

Council Member Stutts advised the meeting was not personal, but he intended to discuss how council members could receive clearer and timelier information from staff. He called the meeting because council members cannot communicate privately and needed a forum to establish better procedures for sharing information. He spoke about issues at the previous meeting, where confusion and last-minute recalculations during the millage rate vote led to disorganization and public criticism. He advised that facts presented to council must be accurate and complete, as errors in rate studies and reports lead to misinformation, public distrust, and unnecessary conflict.

City Manager Steve Kennedy explained that staff made an intentional effort to support the new council members by scheduling an extra budget workshop for discussion only, with no votes, to ensure understanding. At the conclusion of that meeting, the council's direction was to proceed with a 5.3 millage rate and a 3% COLA, which staff followed. He advised that in the five days between meetings, no council members reached out to staff to express concerns or request changes, so staff prepared materials based on the direction previously given. Mr. Kennedy advised that staff follows the direction of the council and cannot anticipate concerns unless council members ask questions or communicate issues. He clarified that revising the budget figures would not have required restarting the entire budget process, only recalculating the affected numbers in the resolution.

Mayor Johnson advised the council had previously reached a consensus during the September 11th meeting to set the millage rate at 5.3 and include a 3% COLA for employees.

Council Member Stutts clarified that he did not support the 3% COLA and that his earlier motion was made to show consideration for residents' financial concerns. He advised that new council members appeared to be pressured to change their votes and felt that staff should have been able to make budget recalculations quickly rather than implying the process had to restart. He advised the need for more accurate and timely information and stated that he prefers to independently review materials rather than rely solely on staff recommendations.

Vice Mayor Gaw questioned the purpose of the special meeting and defended the professionalism and accuracy of staff and department heads. He advised that department budgets are prepared months in advance by qualified professionals and that suggesting widespread errors undermines confidence in their work.

Council Member Starnes advised she had a concern about the limited amount of time available to review meeting packets, which are typically received on Thursday afternoons before a Tuesday meeting. She advised that she has discussed this issue with staff who are working to have packets distributed earlier, possibly on Wednesdays, to provide additional time for review and questions.

Van Royal 3688 LaCosta Ct. GCS addressed the council and advised that the five budget options provided by staff during the process were accurate and fair. He encouraged the council to take time for thoughtful discussion, listen to one another and to citizens, and avoid frustration or division during deliberations. Mr. Royal also commended City Manager Steve Kennedy for his leadership and contributions to the city.

Council Member Starnes showed appreciation to Police Chief Hines for taking the time to review his department's budget line by line with her prior to the budget meetings. She advised that the detailed explanations helped her understand the department's needs and priorities.

Kim Evans 631 St. Johns Ave. GCS addressed the council and stated that she was initially confused about the purpose of the special meeting but later understood it focused on communication. She expressed concern over negativity circulating on social media and encouraged the council to lead with unity, professionalism, and integrity. Ms. Evans reminded the council of the city's mission to become a premier 21st-century city and encouraged members not to be influenced by divisive rhetoric or "squeaky wheels."

Council Member Glisson advised that she had met with Mr. Kennedy regarding the budget and agreed that it was time to move forward from the millage and wage discussions.

Council Member Stutts referenced the pending lawsuit included on the agenda and advised that City Attorney Arnold had contacted council members to provide an update. He advised that additional discussion would occur at the upcoming regular meeting.

City Attorney Arnold provided an update on the lawsuit filed by Huntley Corporation concerning the city's stormwater ordinance and rates. He explained the "shade meeting" process permitted under Florida's Sunshine Law, which allows the council to privately discuss litigation strategy with legal counsel. Mr. Arnold stated that the city had attempted to avoid litigation by negotiating with Huntley but that the company filed suit to preserve its legal rights. He advised that the city would continue working with outside counsel and that litigation is currently paused while both parties explore resolution options.

Mayor Johnson thanked the council and staff for their participation and stated that the meeting provided valuable input on improving communication and the information flow between staff and council.

Adjournment

There being no further business to come before the City Council, the meeting was adjourned at 7:08 p.m.

CITY OF GREEN COVE SPRINGS, FLORIDA

Daniel M. Johnson, Mayor

Attest:

Erin West, City Clerk