



Town Council Workshop

October 07, 2025 at 2:00 PM

Howey-in the-Hills Town Hall

101 N. Palm Ave.,

Howey-in-the-Hills, FL 34737

MINUTES

Mayor Wells called the Town Council Workshop to order at 2:06 p.m.
Mayor Wells led the attendees in the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag.
Councilor Reneé Lannamañ delivered an invocation.

ROLL CALL

Acknowledgement of Quorum Present and Proper Notice Given

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Mayor Pro Tem Tim Everline | Councilor Jon Arnold | Councilor Reneé Lannamañ | Councilor David Miles | Mayor Graham Wells

STAFF PRESENT:

Sean O'Keefe, Town Manager | Heather Ramos, Town Attorney | Public Services Director, Morgan Cates | Victoria Pedane, Executive Assistant

WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION OF GUESTS

Mayor Wells welcomed former Police Chief, Rick Thomas, and Town resident, Joshua Husemann, to the workshop.

AGENDA APPROVAL/REVIEW

None

PUBLIC QUESTION & COMMENT

Any person wishing to address the Mayor and Town Council and who is not on the agenda is asked to speak their name and address. Three (3) minutes is allocated per speaker. The general Public Question & Comment period will be limited to a maximum of thirty (30) minutes unless extended by the Presiding Officer.

None

NEW BUSINESS

1. Discussion: **GrayRobinson (RFQ 2025-006 Town Attorney Interview)**

The Town's current legal team from GrayRobinson, led by Heather Ramos with Tom Wilkes and associates, introduced their bench strength and described firmwide capabilities across state and local government law, procurement, construction, employment, public finance/tax-exempt debt, and eminent domain. Mr. Wilkes cited recent outcomes for the Town: invoking double-taxation protections to halt proposed Sheriff dispatch fees; creation of a standardized construction contract template; voter-approved charter amendments to modernize borrowing limits; and drafting work supporting major updates to the Future Land Use Element and Land Development Code. He also noted prior work to enable solid-waste billing via the tax roll and securing annexation consent agreements (e.g., Drake Point and Cedar Creek) for potential future contiguity.

Council discussion focused on borrowing authority, meeting attendance, annexation timing, fee structure, responsiveness, pension governance, and eminent domain. Councilor Miles questioned the utility of the charter's 3% borrowing cap and asked whether it applies to all debt instruments; Mr. Wilkes affirmed the State Constitution requires voter approval for ad valorem-pledged bonds and explained the charter cap had broadly applied to borrowing. On Drake Point, Councilor Miles asserted contiguity now exists and the six-month deferral has lapsed; by consensus, the attorneys agreed it would be appropriate for the Town Manager to send a letter prompting annexation initiation. Regarding fees, Mr. Wilkes opposed a monthly flat-fee retainer, citing perverse incentives, and advocated active scope management through ongoing attorney-management dialogue.

Mayor Wells raised responsiveness and workload balance between Ms. Ramos and Mr. Wilkes; the firm committed to same-day acknowledgements, copying Ms. Epperson to ensure coverage, and routing tasks to the most efficient subject-matter attorney. On the Police Officers' Pension (Ch. 185), Mr. Wilkes noted the pension attorney represents the fund, not the Town, and emphasized problem-solving to avoid litigation; Mayor Wells referenced prior contribution anomalies that were corrected. On eminent domain, the firm described experience for both condemning authorities and landowners (including utility and park projects) and, drawing from empirical practice, cautioned that negotiated purchases often exceed appraised value, with costs typically increasing from pre-suit negotiations to filed cases and trials. The session closed with advantages of continuity (institutional knowledge, established working relationships) and acknowledgment that attorney attendance expectations and cost considerations will continue to be balanced by the Council.

Mayor Wells called for a 5-minute recess at 3:07 p.m.

2. Discussion: **Town Manager Annual Review**

Mayor Wells reconvened the Town Council at 3:12 p.m.

Mayor Wells opened the discussion with Councilor Arnold. He explained that his focus was on fiscal performance and proper budget execution, noting three consecutive years of balanced general funds without cross-fund subsidies. Councilor Arnold and the Mayor Wells discussed the improved accuracy of cost allocations between the General and Water Funds, crediting the Town Manager, Finance Supervisor Ojeda, and the Mayor's input for a more transparent financial system. Councilor Lannamañ read from her written evaluation, commending the Town Manager's steady professional growth and reliable management despite frequent conflicting directives from the Council. She praised the clarity of the FY26 budget, contrasting it with the confusion of past formats, and emphasized the need for continued long-term planning, proactive community engagement, and more activities for families to support the Town's sustainability and growth.

Councilor Miles stated that his score for the Town Manager declined from the previous period due to uneven handling of Council decisions and perceived favoritism toward certain members' viewpoints. He acknowledged major improvements in fiscal discipline and intergovernmental relations but cited frustration over procedural conflicts, salary discussions, and the handling of the Town Manager's

vacation leave. He urged greater leadership in uniting differing council philosophies and better consistency in communication. Mayor Pro Tem Everline concurred, rating the Town Manager lower this cycle and citing deficiencies in communication, responsiveness to residents, and regional outreach. He shared multiple examples of delayed follow-up and limited transparency, though he also recognized improvements in internal management, employee recognition, and staff hiring.

Mayor Wells provided context, affirming that the Town Manager's role is to carry out Council policy and that he bears responsibility for both the Town's successes and shortcomings. He praised the cohesion of the staff under the Town Manager's leadership, particularly in organizing the Centennial Founder's Day celebration, and reiterated that overall operations are professional and well-managed.

Following the evaluation discussion, Councilors Miles and Mr. O'Keefe updated the group on County meetings regarding the potential transfer of Number 2 Road to the Town, explaining that the County appeared open to relinquishing jurisdiction, provided the Town formally accepts it. The discussion also covered development access points for Mission Rise and Hillside Groves, with Council consensus favoring additional entrances for safety but cautioning against creating high-speed cut-throughs.

Later, Councilor Lannamañ reported on a site visit to Mission Inn following resident complaints about early-morning noise from golf course maintenance. She recommended adopting a noise ordinance with a clause exempting Mission Inn, while other members discussed balancing resident concerns with the resort's long-standing operations and economic role.

Finally, Councilor Everline questioned the Charter provisions limiting direct communication with department heads and the Town Attorney. Mr. O'Keefe and Mayor Wells clarified that inquiries are permitted but directives must go through the Town Manager, and that legal communications require authorization to control costs. Councilor Lannamañ then raised concerns about the Police Chief hiring process, arguing that the ten-day posting period was too brief and risked perceptions of unfairness. Mayor Wells summarized the process: five qualified applicants, an interview panel of law enforcement professionals, and the Town Manager's recommendation of Lt. Giddens for Council confirmation. Councilors Miles and Lannamañ maintained that the short posting and low salary range likely reduced applicant quality and urged greater transparency to avoid community division. Mr. O'Keefe defended the process as fair and compliant, emphasizing that local recruitment challenges and compensation limits constrained the pool, and the matter was deferred for final discussion at the upcoming Council meeting.

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business to discuss, a motion was made by Councilor Lannamañ to adjourn the meeting; Councilor Miles seconded the motion. Motion was approved unanimously by voice vote.

The Meeting adjourned at 4:40 p.m.

Graham Wells, CMC, Mayor

ATTEST:

John Brock, Town Clerk