



Town Council Special Meeting

October 13, 2025 at 5:00 PM
Howey-in the-Hills Town Hall
101 N. Palm Ave.,
Howey-in-the-Hills, FL 34737

MINUTES

Mayor Wells called the Town Council Special Meeting to order at 5:04 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 | Morgan Cates, Public Services Director | John Brock, Deputy Town Manager / Town Clerk

WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION OF GUESTS

Mayor Wells welcomed former Mayor Martha MacFarlane.

AGENDA APPROVAL/REVIEW

Motion made by Councilor Lannamañ to approve the special meeting's agenda; seconded by Councilor Miles. Motion approved unanimously by voice vote.

Voting

Yea: Mayor Pro Tem Everline, Councilor Arnold, Councilor Lannamañ, Councilor Miles, Mayor Wells

Nay: 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

OLD BUSINESS

1. Consideration and Approval: Town Attorney Selection

Town Manager, Sean O’Keefe, reported that five law firms had responded to RFQ 2025-006 for Town legal services, though one firm withdrew before interviews were conducted. The remaining four, GrayRobinson (the incumbent), Sabatini Law, Shepard Smith Hand & Brackins, and Vose Law Firm, were interviewed publicly on October 7th and 8th. Mayor Wells explained that the review stemmed from a Council policy to issue new RFQs for outside professional services every five years, noting that GrayRobinson had represented the Town since approximately 2006. He summarized the results of the Council’s weighted straw poll, emphasizing that lower scores indicated stronger preference: Shepard Smith Hand & Brackins received a total of eight points, Vose scored eleven, GrayRobinson twelve, and Sabatini nineteen. Councilors acknowledged that all firms were qualified, but differing perspectives emerged regarding depth of expertise, cost, and institutional familiarity.

Mayor Pro Tem Everline expressed reservations about the straw poll method and voiced support for retaining GrayRobinson, citing its long history with the Town, strong institutional knowledge of ongoing development agreements, and size. He cautioned that replacing the firm could increase long-term costs and noted that several attorneys he consulted advised against changing counsel for a lower-cost alternative. Councilor Miles, however, favored Vose Law Firm, citing its larger team, strong educational credentials, and a flat-fee structure that would cap costs while including litigation. He ranked GrayRobinson second and Shepard Smith third, also expressing concern about possible conflicts of interest if the Town selected Sabatini due to a County Commissioner’s involvement in that firm. Councilor Lannamañ ranked Shepard Smith first and Vose second, praising attorney Abigail Osborne-Libero for her preparation and responsiveness. She favored the concept of a flat-rate billing model such as Vose’s, which could prevent runaway costs and provide predictability, while noting that the Town Charter restricts direct Council-Attorney contact.

Councilor Arnold also supported Shepard, Smith, Hand, & Brackins, highlighting the benefit of a “fresh set of eyes,” the firm’s smaller scale and responsiveness, and his concern that GrayRobinson’s size encouraged billable-hour inefficiencies. He noted that Vose’s team had not reviewed the Town Charter before their interview, a concern for diligence, and referenced recent issues under GrayRobinson, including high costs for the noise ordinance and delays finalizing the Water Treatment Plant #3 contract. Mayor Wells observed that Shepard Smith’s proposed hourly rates could reduce legal expenses by roughly twenty-seven percent compared to current costs, while Vose’s proposed flat monthly retainer would total about \$127,000 annually. Council members discussed that the FY 2026 budget included approximately \$100,000 in legal fees in the General Fund, with totals of about \$122,000 when all funds were included.

Mayor Wells and Mr. O’Keefe both cited favorable references for Shepard, Smith, Hand, & Brackins from Mount Dora officials and other attorneys familiar with their work. It was noted that, if appointed, the firm’s start date would likely be November 1st, with a two-week transition period to coordinate with GrayRobinson. In closing, Mayor Wells acknowledged that both Vose and Shepard Smith were strong candidates and that his own view shifted after the interviews, favoring Shepard Smith after their presentation.

Mayor Wells opened Public Comment for this item only.

Clay Ormsbee, 301 N. Lakeshore Blvd. – Town resident, Clay Ormsbee, addressed the Council in support of retaining GrayRobinson as the Town’s legal counsel. He stated that in his long experience as a resident, GrayRobinson had been an exemplary and responsive firm, and he questioned whether the discussion to change firms was motivated primarily by cost. Mr. Ormsbee observed that he had not heard any complaints about GrayRobinson’s quality of work or commitment to the Town, noting that

occasional delays in legal responses can reflect thoroughness rather than neglect. He recalled the firm's support during the McGill recall period, including occasions when GrayRobinson provided legal assistance at no charge due to the Town's heavy caseload. He emphasized that the firm had demonstrated loyalty and a vested interest in Howey-in-the-Hills' success.

Mr. Ormsbee cautioned that hiring a new firm would create a costly learning curve and risk potential mistakes while they became familiar with the Town's operations. He cited his own experience on the Police Pension Board, where an attorney replacement shortly after hiring led to similar disruptions. Concluding, he remarked that any short-term cost savings from switching firms were minimal compared to the long-term value of continuity and institutional knowledge, humorously suggesting that if savings were needed, the Town could "build a City Hall that's only six stories high, not seven."

Martha MacFarlane, 63 Camino Real – Town resident, Martha MacFarlane, also spoke in favor of retaining GrayRobinson as the Town's legal counsel. She emphasized the firm's long history with Howey-in-the-Hills and their exceptional depth of institutional knowledge. Ms. MacFarlane recounted that, even prior to the McGill recall period, GrayRobinson had been instrumental in helping the Town recover and organize records after a former clerk failed to properly document ordinances and resolutions. Attorneys Heather Ramos and Tom Wilkes were able to provide complete legal documentation that the Town itself no longer possessed. She further noted that during the McGill recall and related matters involving the Florida League of Cities, GrayRobinson's familiarity with the Town's files and history saved significant time and expense through their immediate responsiveness.

Ms. MacFarlane described the firm as both the Town's "historians and librarians," stating that their deep bench of attorneys has been indispensable in handling complex issues such as annexation and contraction questions involving Venezia and Drake's Point. She credited attorney Tom Cloud in particular for his support during those proceedings. While acknowledging that there may have been occasional delays in contract work, such as those referenced by Councilor Arnold regarding the water plant, she advised that such matters could be addressed through escalation within the firm. She concluded by urging the Council to recognize GrayRobinson's unmatched continuity, depth, and dedication, stating that she did not believe any other firm could serve the Town as effectively.

Eric Gunesch, 448 Avila Pl. – Town resident, Eric Gunesch, spoke in support of retaining GrayRobinson, cautioning the Council against an abrupt transition to a new law firm.

Marie Gallelli, 1104 N. Tangerine Ave. – Town resident, Marie Gallelli, also spoke in favor of continuing the Town's legal relationship with GrayRobinson. She began by addressing concerns about the Vose Law Firm's proposal, explaining that when the firm was initially informed of the Town's legal budget, they responded with a \$20,000 monthly retainer, equating to \$240,000 annually. Only after being advised that the Town's actual budget was approximately \$122,000 did Vose revise its proposal to roughly half that amount. Ms. Gallelli stated that this demonstrated poor judgment on the firm's part and raised doubts about its reliability and transparency.

She further recalled her own experience as a former council member during the McGill recall period, emphasizing the importance of experienced and dependable legal representation. Ms. Gallelli said that while the Council might seek to save money, doing so by replacing a firm with GrayRobinson's level of institutional knowledge and proven service would be a mistake. She concluded that there were other, more appropriate areas in which the Town could look for savings, reaffirming her full support for continuing with GrayRobinson.

Mayor Wells closed Public Comment for this item.

Mayor Wells acknowledged the community's feedback and the range of capable firms considered, noting that Attorney Tom Wilkes's retirement from GrayRobinson represented not a liability but an opportunity. Mayor Wells explained that, while Mr. Wilkes had served the Town well, Attorney Heather

Ramos, whom he had also worked with during his tenure in Astatula, maintains a broader client base, operates with greater efficiency, and is highly responsive. He suggested that, under her leadership, the Town could expect timelier results, which would translate into cost savings even at GrayRobinson's \$310 hourly rate.

Motion made by Councilor Lannamañ for the Town to continue to retain Gray Robinson as its law firm; seconded by Mayor Pro Tem Everline. Motion approved by roll call vote.

Voting

Yea: Mayor Pro Tem Everline, Councilor Lannamañ, Councilor Miles, Mayor Wells

Nay: Councilor Arnold

NEW BUSINESS

None

ADJOURNMENT

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

The Meeting adjourned at 5:55 p.m. | **Attendees: 43**

Graham Wells, CMC, Mayor

ATTEST:

John Brock, Town Clerk