



Town Council Workshop

October 08, 2025 at 4:00 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 4:04 p.m.
Mayor Wells led the attendees in the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag.
Councilor Jon Arnold 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 (via Zoom) | Councilor David Miles | Mayor Graham Wells

STAFF PRESENT:

Sean O'Keefe, Town Manager | Victoria Pedane, Executive Assistant

WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION OF GUESTS

None

AGENDA APPROVAL/REVIEW

Mayor Wells asked the other Town Councilors in attendance if anyone wanted to change the attendance, no changes were requested.

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: **Sabatini (RFQ 2025-006 Town Attorney Interview)**

Mayor Wells explained that the Town is conducting its five-year review of professional services and heard from the Sabatini Law Firm (Mrs. Francheska Sabatini, lead; Mr. Gavin Rollins, Associate; Ms.

Summer Douglas, Paralegal). The firm emphasized local presence, high accessibility, no travel billing, and a single hourly rate, noting a \$5,000 monthly retainer for routine Town Attorney duties (meeting attendance, agenda review, standard drafting/advice) with non-routine research and any litigation billed hourly; they also highlighted in-house litigation capacity and discounted litigation rates compared to outsourcing. In response to Council questions, Mrs. Sabatini affirmed she would attend the Town's regular meetings without scheduling conflicts, would relinquish representation of the Town's Police Pension Board if selected, and would maintain an ethical firewall regarding Mr. Anthony Sabatini's role as a County Commissioner, using conflict counsel only when necessary (e.g., direct County negotiations). On subject-matter expertise, the firm reported experience with CDD financings and eminent domain (primarily "slow take"), stated that specialized bond counsel would be engaged for complex municipal borrowings, and described a strategy favoring early settlement to control costs. Regarding the Town Charter's requirement that attorney contact be approved by the Town Manager or a Council majority, the firm agreed to route requests, accordingly, answering only minor clarifications directly, to prevent unauthorized projects and cost escalation. Mayor Wells summarized the Charter's history as a cost-control measure.

Mayor Wells called for a 5-minute recess at 4:55 p.m.

2. Discussion: **Shepard, Smith, Hand, and Brackins (RFQ 2025-006 Town Attorney Interview)**

Mayor Wells reconvened the meeting at 5:00 p.m.

Attorney Patrick Brackins and associates Abigayle Osborne-Liborio and Holli New of Shepard, Smith, Hand & Brackins presented their qualifications to the Council. Mr. Brackins explained that the firm, based in Maitland since 2008, represents twelve municipalities across Central Florida, including Mount Dora and Dade City, and that all three shareholders are board-certified in City, County, and Local Government Law. He emphasized his background in litigation and appellate law, his philosophy of providing independent, apolitical legal advice, and the firm's commitment to professionalism, responsiveness, and full-service municipal representation. The team stated that while they perform both transactional and litigation work, their focus is to advise lawfully and objectively without engaging in policy or politics.

Associate attorney Ms. New described her lifelong exposure to municipal government and her dedication to public service, while Ms. Osborne-Liborio highlighted her litigation background, local government experience, and preparation for the Town's current and past legal matters. She noted that the firm had researched the Town's litigation history and pledged thorough preparation and availability for all Town meetings. Councilor Lannamañ commended her initiative and expressed appreciation for the firm's professionalism and forward-looking approach.

Mr. Brackins addressed several detailed questions regarding billing structure, staffing, and technical expertise. He explained that, while the firm can accommodate either hourly or flat-fee arrangements, he recommended hourly billing for transparency and fiscal control, noting that flat-fee structures often prove unsustainable. His proposed rate included no charge for travel to regular meetings and a modest increase for litigation matters. He outlined the firm's internal review of invoices for accuracy and described the firm's staff of seven attorneys and four support personnel, assuring Council that client workloads and meeting schedules are managed to prevent overextension.

In response to questions from Councilor Miles, Mr. Brackins discussed his firm's experience with municipal bond financing, including a recent \$12 million issuance for Mount Dora, and ongoing utility-related projects in Dade City involving federal grant funding. He and Ms. Osborne-Liborio also described current eminent-domain negotiations for other municipalities, emphasizing statutory compliance, preference for voluntary acquisition, and use of specialized consultants when necessary.

The firm confirmed it had not filed an eminent-domain case but had successfully negotiated property purchases to avoid litigation.

When asked about compliance with the Town Charter's rule requiring all attorney contact to be approved by the Town Manager or Council majority, Mr. Brackins affirmed he would honor that process, establishing procedures in advance to ensure transparency while remaining responsive to Council inquiries. He explained that any direct calls from councilors would be logged and reflected on invoices to maintain accountability.

Finally, the firm described its commitment to continuity, professional neutrality, and ongoing education for elected officials. Mr. Brackins cited the firm's history of long-term relationships with cities that later reinstated them after transitions and offered to provide annual Sunshine Law and quasi-judicial training for new members. The presentation concluded with a discussion of the Town's rapid growth, development pressures, and long-term planning needs, during which the firm acknowledged the importance of preserving Howey-in-the-Hills' character while managing inevitable expansion.

3. Discussion: **Vose (RFQ 2025-006 Town Attorney Interview)**

Attorney Becky Vose, founding partner of the Vose Law Firm, appeared before Council accompanied by Managing Partner Wade Vose, Partner Nancy Stuparich, and Attorneys Stephanie Bello and Chloe Berryman. Ms. Vose explained that the firm is composed of eight full-time attorneys and one "of counsel," collectively possessing over 150 years of local-government experience. The firm exclusively represents public entities, never developers or private litigants, and currently serves as city or town attorney for 14 Florida municipalities including Daytona Beach Shores, Oviedo, Cocoa Beach, and Fort Myers Beach. She stressed that all clients have 24-hour access to the firm's attorneys, who emphasize rapid, practical legal advice and proactive avoidance of litigation.

Ms. Vose described the firm's defining feature: a single flat-fee structure that includes all services, even litigation, rather than hourly billing. For Howey-in-the-Hills, the proposal was a \$10,000 monthly fee, slightly under the Town's current budget, with no additional hourly charges except pass-through costs reimbursed by developers. She asserted that this model encourages frequent communication and prevents the Town from hesitating to seek counsel due to cost. Using examples from past municipal clients, she recounted successful litigation strategies that discouraged future suits and described how the firm's "can-do" philosophy aligns its interests with those of its clients.

Ms. Stuparich, a Clermont resident and triathlete, was identified as the attorney who would attend Town meetings. She has 33 years of experience in municipal, land-use, and real-estate law, dual master's degrees in Public Administration and Urban & Regional Planning, and certifications in labor relations and redevelopment. Mr. Wade Vose, board-certified in City, County, and Local Government Law, discussed his experience with charter review commissions, eminent domain, and acquisition of private utilities, including a successful State Revolving Fund financing for the Village of Indiantown. Ms. Bello (UF Law 2020) serves as Town Attorney for Oakland and handles major planned developments, while Ms. Berryman (UF Law graduate and current City Attorney for Brooksville) described her litigation work and development of contract systems and lien-recovery processes.

In response to Councilor Miles's questions, Ms. Vose confirmed decades of experience with municipal bond financing, typically working alongside specialized bond counsel. She also outlined her extensive eminent-domain background, including work for the City of Orlando on major public projects such as the Orlando Arena. Both she and Mr. Vose favored negotiated settlements to limit legal costs but stated the firm was fully capable of trial work when necessary.

Discussion turned to the Town Charter clause restricting direct attorney contact without Town Manager or Council authorization. Ms. Vose acknowledged she had never seen such a provision and described it as "extremely difficult," while Mr. Vose assured the Council the firm would comply strictly with the

Charter as written. He suggested that a standing resolution might authorize individual Council contact under the flat-fee arrangement, or that future Charter revisions could address the matter more clearly.

Mayor Wells and Council members discussed past litigation history and continuity concerns, noting the Charter's origin in a 2019 recall and lawsuit. When asked about future fee adjustments, Ms. Vose explained that the firm applies only a standard Consumer Price Index (CPI) adjustment annually and that workload fluctuations generally balance across clients. Council members expressed appreciation for the firm's experience, professionalism, and accessibility. The Mayor thanked the firm for its presentation and for staying late to conclude the evening's attorney interviews.

Following the attorney interviews, Mayor Wells asked participants to remain briefly for an informal ranking exercise. Mr. O'Keefe proposed that each Council member list their first through fourth choices to gauge overall consensus while impressions were fresh, emphasizing that this was a nonbinding "straw poll." Councilor Everline initially expressed concern about transparency and public input, recalling that a resident, Mr. Chris Sears, had previously wished to comment on the matter. It was agreed that the eventual decision would occur publicly, but that the ranking would help clarify next steps.

After tallying the results, Mr. O'Keefe reported that Shepard, Smith, Hand & Brackins emerged as the clear front-runner, receiving the majority of first-place rankings. Vose Law Firm ranked second, followed by GrayRobinson, and Sabatini Law Firm in fourth place. Councilors discussed their impressions of each candidate: Councilor Arnold and Mayor Wells praised the Shepard firm's professionalism and balance of experience, while Councilor Miles noted that he ranked them third primarily due to the relative youth of two associate attorneys. Members agreed that the Vose firm was highly knowledgeable, but that Ms. Vose's presentation style dominated the discussion.

The Council also expressed appreciation for all firms' qualifications and observed that the smaller firms demonstrated hunger and focus. Mayor Wells remarked that he had been particularly impressed by Patrick Brackins and his associates from Shepard, Smith, Hand & Brackins. The group discussed the potential for a special meeting at 5:00 p.m. on Monday, October 20, 2025, to allow further deliberation and public comment before any formal vote. It was determined that the meeting would be noticed as a special meeting, providing flexibility either to discuss or take action if the Council was ready.

ADJOURNMENT

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

The Meeting adjourned at 8:00 p.m.

Graham Wells, CMC, Mayor

ATTEST:

John Brock, Town Clerk