



**TOWN OF LOXAHATCHEE GROVES
TOWN COUNCIL COMMUNITY OPEN DISCUSSION WORKSHOP
MEETING MINUTES**

**TOWN HALL COUNCIL CHAMBERS – 155 F. Road, Loxahatchee Groves, FL 33470
Tuesday, April 2, 2024**

TOWN COUNCIL AGENDA ITEMS

CALL TO ORDER:

Mayor Danowski called the meeting to order at 6:04 P.M.

ROLL CALL:

Mayor Laura Danowski, Vice Mayor Robert Shorr, Councilmember Margaret Herzog, Councilmember Phillis Maniglia, Councilmember Marianne Miles, Town Manager Francine Ramaglia, Town Attorney Glen Torcivia, Director of Public Works Richard Gallant, Project Coordinator Jeff Kurtz, Town's Financial Consultant Chris Wallace (of Munilytics) and Interim Town Clerk Valerie Oakes were present.

OPEN DISCUSSION:

Town Manager Ramaglia provided an update regarding the upcoming workload and planning schedule for the Council. She noted that the Council's agenda schedule, which was included in the current meeting agenda, would need to be revisited due to the volume of planning items coming in. She mentioned that several applications, such as Community of Hope and a preschool on Okeechobee, have been pending for years. Additionally, the PK property, which is currently closed, is being actively reviewed through meetings with the applicant to move the process forward. There are also new property owners along Southern Boulevard requesting conceptual meetings with the Council. Due to the growing number of planning-related matters, Francine suggested the Council would need to select additional dates for special meetings or workshops specifically focused on planning, separate from regular business meetings. She emphasized the need for at least one planning-focused meeting in May. Ms. Ramaglia also recommended holding a drainage workshop that would include an update on the Resilient Florida Grant project and a discussion of possible code changes affecting the district. This may include provisions related to

culvert restoration and water use permits. She stated that additional meetings in September would also be necessary and will be discussed further in the appropriate agenda item. Additionally, she brought up the debris management site and asked the Council for direction on whether the item should go directly to the Council or be routed first through the Planning, Zoning, and Building Board. She emphasized that the Council has a significant increase in workload ahead due to these planning and policy matters.

Mayor Danowski stated that following the last Council meeting, she received multiple emails and phone calls from residents expressing concern about the recent tree removal activities. She noted that the feedback included significant unrest regarding the disturbance of wildlife, including owls. In response to the concerns raised, she called for an emergency meeting to address the issue.

Director of Public Works Richard Gallant addressed a concern raised via Facebook and shared in an email from Mayor Danowski regarding the alleged removal of a tree on B Road that was believed to contain an endangered species of owl. He clarified that no trees being removed have any nests, and the town has never intended to remove trees with active nests unless they have already fallen or are obstructing roadways or waterways. The specific photo in the Facebook post was identified as originating from a 2017 article about owls in North Carolina, not from Loxahatchee Groves. He explained that the eastern screech owl shown in the post is classified as “least concern,” meaning it is not endangered or threatened. He suggested the town could consider building owl boxes, potentially with the help of a local Boy Scout working on an Eagle project, to support the species’ presence in the area. Mr. Gallant addressed a follow-up claim that the species is protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, confirming that while this is true, the town has no intention of violating that law either. He reiterated that no protected trees are being removed and requested the source of any claims to the contrary so the record could be corrected. He encouraged residents to contact Public Works directly with concerns, stating that the department is committed to making informed, careful decisions with respect to safety, travel, and environmental impact. He stressed the importance of transparency and discouraged reliance on social media as a means of governance or information.

Roxana Coleman shared that it has been 40 years since she moved to the area, coinciding with her grandmother’s birthday, which is also the day they closed on their property. She reminisced about the original schoolhouse that once stood on the site, noting that it was used for various community events including elections, party meetings, and water control landowners’ meetings. When the school board planned to tear it down, she was part of a large group that worked to save it and ultimately succeeded in relocating it to the fairgrounds. Ms. Coleman has been involved with the schoolhouse for over 20 years and shared that the building will be 90 years old next year. She noted that the town does not currently have a picture of the schoolhouse on display and suggested that it would be meaningful to add one. She mentioned that Roy Berger built both the school and the packing house, and his son, Clifford Berger, was also a notable builder in the county and remains interested in local events. She emphasized the historical importance of the schoolhouse, highlighted the annual reunions still attended by former students, and encouraged the town to consider commemorating the building with a photograph or display, especially given its age and significance.

Cassie Suchy addressed the Council to express concerns regarding the town's handling of her public records requests. She explained that she received multiple emails from the town stating that her requests were closed because the town was "unable to contact [her] to assist in making a focused and effective request reasonably described and identifiable." She noted that while she has received documents for a few cases, the majority of her requests remain unfulfilled. She shared that the Town Manager contacted her asking to connect in order to fulfill the requests, but instead of working through the records, she continued receiving closure notices. She emphasized that she has been patient and has already submitted a 5-day notice of intent to sue, though her goal is to obtain the records, not to pursue litigation. She also explained that she had been asked several times to meet with a town staff member but was unable to do so without taking time off work and did not believe a meeting was necessary to fulfill her request. Ms. Suchy stressed that under Florida law, it is not her responsibility to assist with fulfilling public records requests—the burden lies with the town as the custodian of records. She stated that a proper response should be that the record doesn't exist or cannot be found, not a generic closure notice. She added that one of her future records requests will be for all internal communication regarding the closure of her current requests, as she suspects they were closed using a blanket response rather than being individually reviewed. She highlighted a specific past request about signed easement documents tied to a building permit discussed publicly on December 6th, reiterating that her requests were reasonable and not overly complex. She concluded by stating her disappointment in how the matter was handled and urged the town to provide more appropriate and lawful responses.

Town Manager Ramaglia responded to the public records concerns raised earlier. She explained that before former Town Clerk Lakisha left, she had implemented a new system called NextRequest for handling public records, which had been approved by the Council. All public records requests, including those from the resident in question, Ms. Suchy's request was entered into that system. When Town Clerk Oakes joined the team, she printed out all of Ms. Suchy's requests from the system. Town Manager Ramaglia stated that she advised Town Clerk Oakes to pay particular attention to Ms. Suchy's records and suggested inviting her in to help clarify which requests had been fulfilled and which had not—since former Town Clerk Lakisha did not leave documentation indicating what had already been completed. Town Manager Ramaglia emphasized that the town has been transparent about the challenge they face without knowing what was fulfilled prior to former Town Clerk Lakisha's departure, and without sufficient detail from Ms. Suchy on what was still outstanding, they were unable to determine which records were missing. She acknowledged the frustration, especially in cases where there was no record of any responses. She also clarified that the town is not required to create records it does not already possess, referring to a recent request for easements which are maintained in the Palm Beach County official book of records—not necessarily by the town. However, she assured that they could provide what is available and mentioned her efforts to communicate directly with Ms. Suchy, including sending an email earlier that day reiterating their willingness to fulfill her requests, but again requesting clarification on what records she had not yet received. She mentioned previous examples, such as phone records, that they had attempted to fulfill but couldn't retrieve due to system limitations. Town Manager Ramaglia reaffirmed that the town has consistently acted in good faith, regularly reached out for clarification, and expressed appreciation for Ms. Suchy's follow-up, particularly regarding ongoing code enforcement cases.

Lisa El-Ramey addressed the Town Council, Town Attorney, and Town Manager on behalf of the Loxahatchee Groves Landowners Association (LGLA). She read a formal statement to inform the town of LGLA's internal conflict of interest policy. The policy was created to ensure transparency and to address any potential conflicts that may arise from elected officials serving on the LGLA board or participating in membership. She explained that the LGLA board requests all elected officials to recuse themselves from participating in any discussions or decision-making at LGLA board meetings, general membership meetings, or events if the matter may later come before the Town Council for a vote. "Recuse" was defined as completely removing oneself from the discussion and decision-making process. Ms. El-Ramey closed the statement by inviting any questions about the policy to be directed to the association's email: info@mylgl.com.

**MOTION: MAYOR DANOWSKI/COUNCILMEMBER MANIGLIA MOVED
TO RECEIVE AND FILE THE DOCUMENT PLACED ON
RECORD. MOTION PASSED UNANIMOUSLY (5-0).**

ADJOURNMENT

Mayor Danowski adjourned the community meeting at 6:31 P.M.

ATTEST:

**TOWN OF LOXAHATCHEE GROVES,
FLORIDA**

Valerie Oakes, Interim Town Clerk

Mayor Laura Danowski

Vice Mayor Robert Shorr

Council Member Margaret Herzog

Council Member Phillis Maniglia

Council Member Marianne Miles