



**CITY OF OKEECHOBEE, FLORIDA**  
**APRIL 21, 2026, REGULAR CITY COUNCIL MEETING**  
**OFFICIAL MINUTES**

**I. CALL TO ORDER**

Mayor Watford called the regular meeting of the City Council for the City of Okeechobee to order on April 21, 2026, at 6:00 P.M. in the City Council Chambers, located at 55 Southeast (SE) 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue (AVE), Room 200, Okeechobee, Florida (FL). The invocation was offered by Pastor Don Hanna of the First Methodist Church; followed by the Pledge of Allegiance led by Council Member McAuley.

**II. ATTENDANCE**

City Clerk Lane Gamiotea called the roll. Members physically present to establish a quorum: Mayor Dowling R. Watford, Jr., Vice Mayor Monica M. Clark, Council Members Noel A. Chandler, Robert "Bob" Jarriel, and David R. McAuley.

**III. AGENDA AND PUBLIC COMMENTS**

A. Mayor Watford announced the following modifications to the published agenda: Exhibit 9 was added for New Business item VII.E., and New Business item VII.F., Exhibit 10 was added.

B. Motion by Council Member Jarriel, seconded by Council Member Chandler to adopt the revised agenda as amended.

**Motion Carried Unanimously.**

C. Two comment cards were received for public participation for issues not on the agenda. City Administrator Gary Ritter introduced Mr. Alex Masmela, the new Chief Executive Officer (CEO) for HCA Florida Raulerson Hospital. Mr. Masmela, originally from New York, began his career in the private ambulance service as an Emergency Medical Technician, then an Emergency Room and Trauma Nurse before relocating to Port Saint Lucie 21 years ago. He has been a Chief Operating Officer at Palm Beach Gardens Medical Center along with both HCA Florida Saint Lucie and Lawnwood Hospitals. His goal as CEO of Raulerson Hospital is to expand the services provided and reduce the number of patient transfers to other hospitals.

Mr. Bryant Culpepper addressed the City Council to commend the Public Works staff with their swiftness in repairing a pothole at the entrance to the Wawa gas station parking lot. He also commended the City Council and all City staff for everything they do for the community.

**IV. PRESENTATIONS**

A. Mayor Watford proclaimed the week of May 3 through 9, 2026, as Professional Municipal Clerks Week, **Exhibit 1**. The Proclamation was presented to City Clerk Gamiotea, Deputy City Clerk Rogers, and Assistant Deputy City Clerk Rickards, and read into the record as follows: **"Whereas, the Office of the Professional Municipal Clerk, better known as the City Clerk, is a time honored and vital part of local governments throughout the world; and Whereas, the Office of the City Clerk is the oldest among public servants, and Whereas, the Office of the City Clerk provides the professional link between the citizens, the local governing bodies, and agencies of government at other levels, and Whereas, City Clerks have pledged to be ever mindful of their neutrality and impartiality, rendering equal service to all; and Whereas, the City Clerk serves as the information center on functions of local government and community; and Whereas, City Clerks continually strive to improve the administration of the affairs of the Office of the Professional Municipal Clerk through participation in education programs, seminars, workshops and the annual meetings of their state, provincial, county, and international professional organizations; and Whereas, it is most appropriate that we recognize the accomplishments of the Office of the Professional Municipal Clerk. Now, Therefore, I, Dowling R. Watford, Jr., by virtue of the authority vested in me as Mayor of the City of Okeechobee, FL, do hereby proclaim the week of May 3 through 9, 2026, as Professional Municipal Clerks Week and further extend appreciation to our Certified Municipal Clerk, Lane Gamiotea, Deputy City Clerk Katie Rogers, Assistant Deputy City Clerk Jessica Rickards, and to all Professional Municipal Clerks for the vital services they perform and their exemplary dedication to the communities they represent."**

B. Mayor Watford proclaimed April 2026 as Water Conservation Month, **Exhibit 2**. The Proclamation was presented to Mrs. Elizabeth Pigman from South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD), and read into the record as follows: **"Whereas, water is a basic and essential need of every living creature; and Whereas, the State of FL, Water Management Districts, and the City of Okeechobee are working together to increase awareness about the importance of water conservation;**

#### IV. PRESENTATIONS CONTINUED

- B. Continued. and Whereas, the City of Okeechobee and the State of FL has designated April, typically a dry month when water demands are most acute, FL's Water Conservation Month, to educate citizens about how they can help save FL's precious water resources; and Whereas, the City of Okeechobee has always encouraged and supported water conservation, through various educational programs and special events; and Whereas, every business, industry, school, and citizen can make a difference when it comes to conserving water; and Whereas, every business, industry, school, and citizen can help by saving water and thus promote a healthy economy and community. Now, Therefore, I, Dowling R. Watford, Jr., by virtue of the authority vested in me as Mayor of the City of Okeechobee, FL, do hereby proclaim the month of April 2026, as Water Conservation Month. The City of Okeechobee is calling upon each citizen and business to help protect our precious resource by practicing water saving measures and becoming more aware of the need to save water."
- C. Mayor Watford proclaimed the week of May 17 through 23, 2026, as Water Reuse Week, **Exhibit 3**. The Proclamation was presented to Mrs. Pigman from SFWMD, and read into the record as follows: "Whereas, safe, clean, and sustainable water resources are essential to FL's environment, economy, citizens and visitors; and Whereas, although FL's water supplies are finite, the state's population and need for water resources continues to increase; and Whereas, water reuse provides a means for conserving and augmenting FL's precious water resources. The State has established the encouragement and promotion of water reuse as objectives in Chapters 373 and 403, Florida Statutes (FS); and Whereas, FL's permitted reuse capacity is more than 1.6 billion gallons per day which equals approximately 62 percent of FL's total permitted capacity for all domestic wastewater treatment facilities; and Whereas, FL has risen to be a national leader in water reuse, reusing approximately 958 million gallons of reclaimed water per day, more than 56 percent of the wastewater treated, to conserve freshwater supplies and recharge our freshwater resources; and Whereas, May, typically a dry month when water demands are high, is a good time to educate residents about how they can help save FL's precious water resources through water reuse. WaterReuse Florida, the state section of the WaterReuse Association, has proclaimed the week of May 17 through 23, 2026, as Florida Water Reuse Week; and Whereas, the City of Okeechobee joins with WaterReuse Florida, the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, and the SFWMD in encouraging and promoting water reuse and conservation. Now, Therefore, I, Dowling R. Watford, Jr., by virtue of the authority vested in me as Mayor of the City of Okeechobee, FL, hereby supports WaterReuse Florida and proclaims the week of May 17 through 23, 2026, as Water Reuse Week in the City of Okeechobee and is calling upon each citizen and business to help protect our precious water resources by practicing water conservation, along with efficient and effective use of reclaimed water."

#### V. CONSENT AGENDA

Motion by Vice Mayor Clark, seconded by Council Member Jarriel to:

- A. Dispense with the reading and approve the April 7, 2026, Minutes [as presented in **Exhibit 4**];
- B. Approve the March 2026 Warrant Register [in the amounts of General Fund, \$458,911.52; Industrial Development Grant Fund, \$33,588.19; Public Facilities Improvement Fund, \$22,263.41; Appropriations Grant Fund, \$18,395.97; and Capital Improvement Projects Fund, \$655.18; as presented in **Exhibit 5**]; and
- C. Appoint Ms. Jessica Rickards as the Regular Member for the Office of the City Clerk, replacing Ms. Cayetana Ortega, to the Employee Grievance Committee, term being April 22, 2026, through December 31, 2027.

**Motion Carried Unanimously.**

#### VI. MAYOR WATFORD OPENED THE PUBLIC HEARING CONTINUED FROM APRIL 7, 2026, FOR ORDINANCE ADOPTION AT 6:27 P.M.

- A. Mayor Watford opened the floor for comments or questions by the public or City Council on the motion on the floor that was postponed to tonight's meeting. The motion was made by Council Member Chandler, seconded by Council Member Jarriel to approve the second reading and adopt proposed Ordinance No. 1327 as amended during the Public Hearing on April 7, 2026, **Exhibit 6**.

Assistant City Attorney Stephen Conteaguero read into the record the amended title of proposed Ordinance No. 1327 as follows: **"AN ORDINANCE OF THE CITY OF OKEECHOBEE, FL; AMENDING THE CODE OF ORDINANCES CHAPTER 26-ELECTIONS, BY REMOVING THE ELECTED OFFICE OF THE CITY CLERK AND REPEALING VARIOUS SECTIONS AS SUPERSEDED BY THE 2022 CITY CHARTER; CHANGING THE QUALIFYING PERIOD FOR CITY COUNCIL CANDIDATES DURING A GENERAL ELECTION; AMENDING THE NOTICE REQUIREMENTS FOR ELECTIONS; REPEALING CERTAIN SECTIONS WHOSE DUTIES ARE CONDUCTED BY THE OKEECHOBEE SUPERVISOR OF ELECTIONS OR CANVASSING BOARD;**

## VI. PUBLIC HEARING CONTINUED

- A. Continued. **AMENDING THE PROCEDURES FOR ACCEPTING THE CANVASSING BOARD RETURNS OF ALL ELECTIONS AND ISSUING CERTIFICATES OF ELECTION; PROVIDING FOR CODIFICATION; PROVIDING FOR CONFLICT; PROVIDING FOR SEVERABILITY; PROVIDING FOR AN EFFECTIVE DATE."**

There were no comments from the public or City Council.

**Roll Call Vote: Chandler – Yea, Clark – Yea, Jarriel – Yea, McAuley – Yea, Watford – Yea.  
Motion Carried Unanimously.**

**MAYOR WATFORD CLOSED THE PUBLIC HEARING AT 6:28 P.M.**

## VII. NEW BUSINESS

- A. Administrator Ritter and City Planner Ben Smith, attending remotely, gave a progress update for the proposed amendments to the Planned Unit Development regulations, as originally discussed on March 18, 2025. The owners of Blue Heron Golf and Country Club hired a firm to submit a Text Amendment to the Residential Planned Unit Development section. While reviewing the application, Mr. Smith also prepared amendments for the Mixed-Use Planned Unit Development section. Both are scheduled to be presented to the Planning Board for a recommendation in May or June, then the adoption by the City Council in July or August. Afterward, a Comprehensive Plan Text Amendment will be required based on the content of the Amendments adopted. **This item was for informational purposes only.**
- B. Administrator Ritter advised that Planners Smith and his Assistant, Ms. Marissa Fewell, have been diligently working on the Future Land Use, Subdivision, and Zoning Maps with City Clerk Gamiotea. It is anticipated that all map drafts will be ready for the City Clerk to review by the end of April. **This item was for informational purposes only.**
- C. Motion by Council Member McAuley, seconded by Vice Mayor Clark to approve the First Amendment to the Interlocal Agreement Concerning Storm Debris Removal with Okeechobee County [term being October 1, 2026, through September 30, 2030, as presented in **Exhibit 7**].  
**Motion Carried Unanimously.**
- D. Motion by Council Member Jarriel, seconded by Council Member Chandler to approve Amendment One to Grant Agreement [No. D0339] with Florida Department of Commerce adding Phase 1 [Roadway] Construction of Northeast (NE) 13<sup>th</sup> AVE and NE 3<sup>rd</sup> Street (ST) [in the Park Street Commerce Center] in the amount of \$521,996.30 [as presented in **Exhibit 8**].  
**Motion Carried Unanimously.**
- E. The eight applications received for the position of City Administrator were discussed, **Exhibit 9** was distributed at meeting. **It was the consensus of the City Council to call a Special Meeting on either May 7, 8, or 11, 2026, to hold in person interviews with the following applicants: Mr. Douglas G. Barber, Mr. Demetre L. Riles, Mr. Mark J. Schneider, and Ms. Denise L. Whitehead.** The applicants will be contacted for their date availability by HR Generalist Prince prior to the Mayor calling, and the City Clerk's Office advertising, the Special Meeting. [Notation: the Special Meeting was set for May 11, 2026, at 9:00 A.M.]
- F. **ITEM ADDED:** Motion by Council Member McAuley, seconded by Vice Mayor Clark to appoint Mr. Reed Mattson to the Municipal Police Officers' and Firefighters' Pension Trust Fund Board of Trustees, City Resident 2 of 2, replacing Mr. Ray Worley, term being April 22, 2026, through September 30, 2027, [as presented in **Exhibit 10**].  
**Motion Carried Unanimously.**

## VIII. CITY ATTORNEY UPDATE

A copy of the update was added to the official Minute File, labeled as **Exhibit 11**.

- Completed the Debris Removal Interlocal Agreement approved at tonight's meeting.
- Creating an Easement for a monument sign in the City right-of-way, requested by Park Street Commerce Center.
- The City has yet to receive feedback on our proposed revisions to the Interlocal with the County for Impact Fees. The County is set to roll their Impact Fees out in mid-May. However, in the absence of an Interlocal Agreement by that time, the City will have the right but not the obligation to collect Impact Fees.
- Working on changing the quality, character, nature, and label of the Technical Review Committee, to make it a staff function and remove it from under Chapter 286, FS/Sunshine Law. The hope is to submit this Land Development Regulation Text Amendment sometime in July.
- Research continues for Major Taylor as to how the City can amend the Code to empower either Code Enforcement or staff to litigate Business Tax Receipt failures/non-renewals/delinquencies.

**IX. CITY ADMINISTRATOR UPDATE**

- The City Hall Hardening Project is coming along nicely. The East archway entrances have been constructed and the soffits and corbels are being installed. To have the front arch entrance (facing West) stand out, staff suggested painting the entrance area and arch a complimentary, but contrasting color from the rest of the building. The windows have been ordered, and the roofing tiles have been delivered.
- The City Seal Mural located on the North side exterior of City Hall had to be covered to replaster the building. It will be repainted [the Mural was a 90<sup>th</sup> birthday gift to the City donated by the Okeechobee Historical Society]. He met with an artist from Okeechobee Main Street to get their input and a quote for this project.
- Should have the Design Build Contract for the Public Safety Building to present to City Council at a June meeting.
- Broached the topic of changing City Council meetings start time to 5:00 P.M. which would help cut down on staff overtime. A Resolution is required to make this change.
- The Commerce Center/NE 9<sup>th</sup> ST resurfacing project is on schedule to be completed next week.

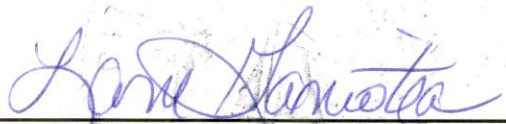
**X. COUNCIL COMMENTS**

- Congratulations were extended after Council Member Chandler announced the birth of his second great-great grandson earlier this morning, making baby Carter a 10<sup>th</sup> Generation Chandler.
- Council Member Jarriel joked he does not want to interrupt his afternoon nap in favor of changing the City Council meeting times to 5:00 P.M. Then reminded everyone that the required annual Ethics Training Class is this Thursday.
- Council Member McAuley conveyed 41 local photographers responded to a Facebook request by an unknown person for names of photographers who take family portraits. This could provide the City with some Business Tax Receipt revenue to ensure all are in compliance.
- Vice Mayor Clark (in reference to changing City Council meeting times) stated she is retiring in January 2027, which might allow her to attend meetings at 5:00 P.M. but would like to receive input from the public before changing the time.

**XI. ADJOURNMENT**

There being no further items, Mayor Watford adjourned the meeting at 7:13 P.M.

Submitted By:



Lane Gamiotea, CMC, City Clerk

Please take notice and be advised that when a person decides to appeal any decision made by the City Council with respect to any matter considered at this meeting, s/he may need to ensure that a verbatim record of the proceeding is made, which record includes the testimony and evidence upon which the appeal is to be based. City Clerk media are for the sole purpose of backup for official records of the Clerk.