



CITY OF OKEECHOBEE, FLORIDA
MAY 5, 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 May 5, 2026, at 6:00 P.M. in the City Council Chambers, located at 55 Southeast 3rd 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 Chandler.

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. There were no modifications made to the published agenda, although Exhibits 9 and 10 were added and noted with their item.
- B. Motion by Council Member Jarriel, seconded by Council Member McAuley to adopt the agenda as published.
Motion Carried Unanimously.
- C. No comment cards were received for public participation for issues not on the agenda.

IV. PROCLAMATIONS

- A. Mayor Watford proclaimed the month of May 2026 as Building Safety Month, **Exhibit 1**. The Proclamation was presented to Mr. Jeffery Newell, City Building Official, and read into the record as follows: **"Whereas, the City of Okeechobee is committed to recognizing that our growth and strength depends on the safety and essential role our homes, buildings, and infrastructure play, both in everyday life and when disasters strike; and Whereas, our confidence in the resilience of these buildings that make up our community is achieved through the devotion of vigilant guardians: building safety and fire prevention officials, architects, engineers, builders, tradespeople, design professionals, laborers, plumbers, and others in the construction industry, who work year round to ensure the safe construction of buildings; and Whereas, these guardians are dedicated members of the International Code Council, a nonprofit that brings together local, state, territorial, tribal, and federal officials who are experts in the built environment to create and implement the highest quality codes and standards to protect us in the buildings where we live, learn, work, and play; and Whereas, these modern building codes and standards include safeguards to protect the public from hazards such as hurricanes, snowstorms, tornadoes, wildfires, floods, and earthquakes; and Whereas, Building Safety Month is sponsored by the International Code Council to remind the public about the critical role of our communities' largely unknown protectors of public safety, our local code officials, who assure us of safe, sustainable, and affordable buildings that are essential to our prosperity; and Whereas, Built to Last, the theme for Building Safety Month 2026, encourages us all to get involved and raise awareness about building safety on a personal, local, and global scale; and Whereas, each year, in observance of Building Safety Month, people all over the world are asked to consider the commitment to improve building safety, resilience, and economic investment at home and in the community, and to acknowledge the essential service provided to all of us by local and state building departments, fire prevention bureaus, and federal agencies in protecting lives and property. 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 May 2026 as Building Safety Month and encourage our citizens to join us as we participate in Building Safety Month activities."**
- B. Mayor Watford proclaimed the week of May 6 through 12, 2026, as National Nurses Week, **Exhibit 2**. The Proclamation was presented to Ms. Lisa Rivera, Dean of Nursing of the Fortis Institute, HCA Florida Raulerson Hospital Chief Executive Officer Mr. Alex Masmela, Chief Nursing Officer Ms. Dorothy Watson and nurses Ms. Becky McKee, Ms. Theresa Starnes, Ms. Jennifer Prescott, Ms. Johnna Wynn, Ms. Gail Prather, and Mr. Careem Searchwell, and read into the record as follows: **"Whereas, nurses are the backbone of the healthcare system, providing compassionate, skilled, and evidence based care to individuals, families, and communities across Okeechobee; and Whereas, nurses play a vital role in promoting health, preventing illness, and improving patient outcomes across diverse settings including hospitals, clinics, schools, and community organizations; and Whereas, the dedication, resilience, and unwavering commitment of nurses have been especially evident during times of public health challenges, demonstrating their courage, leadership, and adaptability in the face of adversity;**

IV. PROCLAMATIONS CONTINUED

- B. Continued. and Whereas, nurses serve not only as caregivers but also as educators, advocates, and leaders who contribute to advancing the quality and accessibility of healthcare within our community; and Whereas, the education and preparation of future nurses through institutions such as local nursing programs and partnerships with healthcare organizations ensure the continued strength and excellence of the nursing profession; and Whereas, National Nurses Week, observed annually from May 6 through May 12, recognizes the invaluable contributions of nurses and culminates on May 12, the birthday of Florence Nightingale, the founder of modern nursing; 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 6 through 12, 2026, as National Nurses Week in the City of Okeechobee, and encourage all residents to join in honoring and celebrating the dedication, compassion, and essential contributions of nurses within our community."
- C. Mayor Watford proclaimed the month of May 2026 as Mental Health Month, **Exhibit 3**. The Proclamation was presented to Mrs. Leah Suarez and Ms. Lizbeth Soriano of Our Village Okeechobee, and read into the record as follows: "**Whereas, mental health is essential to everyone's health and wellbeing, with all people experiencing times of difficulty and stress in their lives; and Whereas, prevention is an effective way to reduce the burden of mental health conditions, and there is strong evidence that early identification and intervention improve outcomes; and Whereas, stigma is ever present in our community and a barrier to mental health care, public awareness and training in evidence based practice preventions models, will help others to seek treatment or gain access to the help they need; and Whereas, Mental Health Month has been observed each May since 1949. Children's Mental Health Day is observed on May 7, 2026, to raise awareness of the importance of mental health and to celebrate the resilience of individuals and communities like ours working to overcome mental health challenges; and Whereas, the theme of Mental Health Month 2026 is More Good Days, Together emphasizing the importance of connection and support in fostering mental wellness for all; and Whereas, every person in this community has a role to play in promoting mental wellness and creating environments where mental health is valued, protected, and prioritized. 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 May 2026 as Mental Health Month in the City of Okeechobee, and call upon all citizens, government agencies, public and private institutions, businesses, and schools to recommit to increasing awareness and understanding of mental health, reducing stigma, and supporting those in need of care and support.**"

V. CONSENT AGENDA

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

- A. Dispense with the reading and approve the April 21, 2026, Minutes [as presented in **Exhibit 4**]; and
- B. Approve the purchase of two Database Servers for the Police Department from ICS Computers in the amount of \$25,898.00 [as presented in **Exhibit 5**].

Motion Carried Unanimously.

VI. NEW BUSINESS

- A. As required by the Interlocal Agreement for Fire Services, Public Safety Director/County Fire Rescue Chief Justin Hazellief provided an update for Fire Services within City Limits from May 2025 to 2026 [a two page handout was distributed at the meeting, labeled **Exhibit 9**, and added to the official Minute file]. Page one included the Call Volume and Service Demand, totaling 1,621 and Fire Prevention Activity (Fire Inspections), totaling 231. Page two included the Current Average Response Time of four minutes and 50 seconds. In summary, the Total Calls for Service has remained stable, while the Average Response Time has improved over the last year. The data collected shows the City is receiving rapid emergency response times and proactive fire prevention from a stable, and improving, County Fire Rescue. A new Deputy Fire Chief was recently hired from Saint Lucie County, who brings with him years of experience and training. The County is in negotiations with the Okeechobee Utility Authority to acquire their property to build a new fire station to assist with the current high call volume on State Road 78, Highway 441 South, and the southwest section of the county. Other updates reported on included mosquito spraying, stating Clarke Environmental is adding a new route to include City Limits, as well as adding a new mosquito trap. Pre-Hurricane Season meetings between the Emergency Operations Center, Army Corp of Engineers, National Weather Service, and South Florida Water Management District have taken place and training is being conducted for potential levee breaches, as well as flood threats from Taylor Creek and Lake Okeechobee overflow into the community.

Chief Hazellief acknowledged the quarterly updates have not been presented since the personnel changeover but assured the City Council they will be presented as required from now on. **This item was for informational purposes only.**

VI. NEW BUSINESS CONTINUED

B. Motion by Council Member McAuley, seconded by Vice Mayor Clark to approve the Fiscal Year 2024-25 Audited Financials prepared by Carr, Riggs, and Ingram, reviewed and presented by Ms. Lindsay Aviles, CPA Partner [as presented in **Exhibit 6**].

Motion Carried Unanimously.

C. Motion by Council Member Jarriel, seconded by Council Member Chandler to approve a Grant Agreement [No. FM1252] with the Department of Financial Services, an agency of the State of FL, through its Division of State Fire Marshal for the exterior renovation of the City of Okeechobee Public Safety Building in the amount of \$2,000,000.00 [as presented in **Exhibit 7**].

Motion Carried Unanimously.

D. Motion by Council Member Jarriel, seconded by Council Member McAuley to approve a Sign Easement Agreement with Park Street Okeechobee, LLC [to be erected in the City right-of-way, Northeast 13th AVE, within the Park Street Commerce Center commercial development, as presented in **Exhibit 8**].

Motion Carried Unanimously.

VII. CITY ATTORNEY UPDATE

A copy of the update was added to the official Minute File, labeled as **Exhibit 10**.

- Completed the review of the City Administrator Employment Agreement template for HR Generalist Heather Prince.
- Continuing to work with the County regarding the proposed Impact Fees Interlocal Agreement. Currently looking at scheduling a meeting between the Administrators and Attorneys.

VIII. CITY ADMINISTRATOR UPDATE

- Gave a status update for the City Hall Hardening Project, since the April 21, 2026, meeting. The windows have been ordered and are roughly three weeks out for delivery; however, an additional window was found on the West side next to the front entrance and has since been ordered. The City has received a quote to replace the City Seal mural on the North side exterior of City Hall, between \$3,000.00 and \$4,000.00, and is waiting on more quotes to come in before presenting the cost to the City Council. All roof leaks have been repaired, the roof tiles have been delivered, and Proctor Construction will be reroofing City Hall once the exterior painting has been completed.
- Proctor Construction will complete the estimating process for the exterior renovations to the Public Safety Building soon. The goal for this project is to texturize and paint the exterior to match City Hall, as well as the possibility of adding a Fire Department Mural. Quotes for the mural will be presented to the City Council along with the Proctor Construction Design Build Contract at a later date.

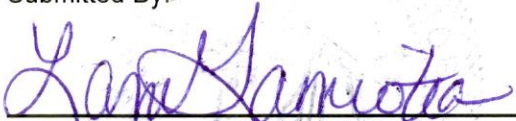
IX. COUNCIL COMMENTS

- Council Member Chandler corrected his comment from the April 21, 2026, meeting. Stating he misspoke and does not have a second great-great grandson, he has a second GREAT grandson.
- Council Member Jarriel reminded everyone of the Special Meeting on Monday, May 11, 2026, at 9:00 A.M. City Clerk Lane Gamiotea added there will be a "Meet and Greet the City Administrator Candidates" from 8:30 A.M. until 9:00 A.M. which will include a coffee and juice bar as well as light breakfast foods.
- Vice Mayor Clark inquired on the format for the Special Meeting and the asking of individualized applicant questions. She was advised by both HR Generalist Prince and Assistant City Attorney Stephen Conteaguero that the meeting's format will be sent out on May 6, 2026, and the City Council may only ask pertinent individualized questions as follow-ups/clarifications to answers received from an applicant.

X. ADJOURNMENT

There being no further items, Mayor Watford adjourned the meeting at 7:18 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.