CITY OF OKEECHOBEE, FLORIDA
SEPTEMBER 21, 2026, REGULAR CITY COUNCIL MEETING AND FINAL BUDGET PUBLIC HEARING FOR FISCAL YEAR 2026-27
OFFICIAL MINUTES

I. CALL TO ORDER

Mayor Watford called the regular meeting of the City Council for the City of Okeechobee to order on September 21, 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 Council Member Chandler; 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., Council Members Noel A. Chandler, Robert "Bob" Jarriel, and David R. McAuley. Vice Mayor Monica M. Clark was noted absent with consent.

III. AGENDA AND PUBLIC COMMENTS

A. One modification was made to the revised published agenda; item IV was withdrawn.

B. Council Member Jarriel made a motion, seconded by Council Member McAuley to adopt the revised published agenda as amended. **Motion Carried**.

C. Four citizens addressed the City Council during the public comment portion for items not on the agenda.

Ms. Karen Kozac, President of the 2026 Chamber of Commerce's Leadership Okeechobee Class, presented the Downtown Okeechobee Pedestrian Wayfinding and Business Discovery Project. The goal is to direct foot traffic to businesses located on the avenues off South Park Street (ST) and promote growth in the Central Business District by installing 8 to 10-feet tall signs, with interchangeable blades, listing the business names. The Leadership Class is asking for the City's support, not financial backing. Initial sign costs, projected to be $15,000.00, will be covered through fundraising. Once in place Okeechobee Main Street would assume maintenance. Ms. Kozac committed to providing regular updates to ensure the project aligns with the City's expectations. **The City Council authorized City Administrator Denise Whitehead to work with the Leadership group to bring back a formal presentation with locations of the signs for their consideration**. A copy of the six-page project report was added and labeled as **Exhibit 13** in the official Minute File.

Ms. Samantha Watson, Executive Director of the Chamber of Commerce of Okeechobee County, thanked the Public Works staff for quickly repairing the Chamber of Commerce building after a pipe burst within the men's bathroom causing flooding throughout the building. She stated the interior looks amazing and the building will be open to the public again on September 22, 2026.

City resident, Mr. Ian Shawn Binkley, voiced opposition to allowing data centers within the City Limits. He also commended the City Council and staff for beautifying the community while maintaining fiscal responsibility.

Mrs. Libby Pigman, External Affairs Director of South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD), shared information about the District's mobile app, which allows residents to report locations of standing water after storms. The submitted data could support future grant applications for regional drainage improvement projects.

IV. PROCLAMATIONS item was withdrawn from the agenda.

V. CONSENT AGENDA

Council Member McAuley made a motion, seconded by Council Member Jarriel to:

A. Dispense with the reading and approve the September 3, 2026, Minutes [as presented in **Exhibit 1**]; and

B. Approve the August 2026 Warrant Register [in the amounts of: General Fund, $810,890.43; Other Grant Capital Fund, $27,811.87; Public Facilities Improvement Fund, $9,735.69; and Capital Improvement Projects Fund, $4,000.00; as presented in **Exhibit 2**].

Motion Carried.

VI. MAYOR WATFORD OPENED THE PUBLIC HEARING AT 6:25 P.M.

A. Motion by Council Member Chandler, seconded by Council member Jarriel to read by title only, proposed Ordinance No. 1333, amending the Comprehensive Plan Future Land Use Map (FLUM) by reclassifying Lots 1 to 4 and 7 to 12 of Block 80, CITY OF OKEECHOBEE, Plat Book 5, Page 5, Okeechobee County public records, 1.611+/- acres, located between Northeast (NE) 4th to 5th AVEs and NE 6th to 7th STs, from Single-Family Residential (SFR) to Industrial (I); Small Scale Map Amendment Application No. 26-001-SSA submitted by Mr. Jeffrey Sumner, Agent on behalf of the property owner, Diamond R. Fertilizer Co., Inc. [as presented in **Exhibit 3**]. **Motion Carried**.

Assistant City Attorney Stephen Conteagüero read into the record the title of Ordinance No. 1333 as follows: "**AN ORDINANCE OF THE CITY OF OKEECHOBEE, FL; AMENDING THE CITY OF OKEECHOBEE COMPREHENSIVE PLAN, ORDINANCE NO. 635 AS AMENDED, BY REVISING THE FLUM ON A CERTAIN TRACT OF LAND MORE PARTICULARLY DESCRIBED HEREIN FROM SFR TO I, APPLICATION NO. 26-001-SSA; PROVIDING FOR INCLUSION OF ORDINANCE AND REVISED FLUM IN THE COMPREHENSIVE PLAN; PROVIDING FOR CONFLICT; PROVIDING FOR SEVERABILITY; PROVIDING FOR AN EFFECTIVE DATE**."

Motion by Council Member McAuley, seconded by Council Member Chandler to approve first reading and adopt proposed Ordinance No. 1333 [as recommended by the Planning Board and Planning Staff based on the findings of facts outlined in the Planning Staff Report which find the Application consistent with the City's Comprehensive Plan, reasonably compatible with adjacent uses, and is consistent with the surrounding pattern of land use].

This Application has an associated Petition, No. 26-001-R to rezone the subject property to Industrial (IND) by Ordinance No. 1334 which is being considered under New Business tonight. Attending remotely, City Planner Marissa Fewell of Morris-Depew and Associates, 2914 Cleveland AVE, Fort Myers, FL 33901, reviewed the highlights of the Application. Mr. Sumner, 410 Northwest 2nd ST, Okeechobee, FL 34972 was in attendance on behalf of the property owner. Mayor Watford clarified the 10-foot landscape buffer requirement and conveyed the neighborhood would appreciate this property to be developed similarly to Diamond R's most recent expansion, as it has helped the noise level within the property and minimizing impacts to the surrounding homes.

City Clerk Gamiotea noted for the record, 23 courtesy notices were mailed to surrounding property owners, with one being returned as undeliverable, four signs noticing the Planning Board and City meeting dates were posted on the subject property, and the proposed Ordinance adoption was properly noticed. As noted in the public comments portion of the Planning Board August 20, 2026, Minutes, there were no objections from surrounding property owners. No objections or comments have been received prior to the Meeting. There were no comments from the City Council or the public.

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

MAYOR WATFORD CLOSED THE PUBLIC HEARING AT 6:36 P.M.

VII. MAYOR WATFORD OPENED THE FISCAL YEAR (FY) 2026-27 FINAL BUDGET PUBLIC HEARING AT 6:36 P.M.

A. Mayor Watford announced the purpose of this Public Hearing is to consider the final reading of ordinances for the proposed Millage Rate levy and proposed Budget for FY October 1, 2026, through September 30, 2027.

B. Mayor Watford announced the proposed Millage Rate levy represents the roll-back rate of 5.8321 computed pursuant to Florida Statutes (FS) 200.065(1).

C. Council Member Jarriel made a motion, seconded by Council Member McAuley to read by title only, proposed Ordinance No. 1331, levying a Millage Rate of 5.8321 on all real and tangible personal property for proposed FY October 1, 2026, through September 30, 2027 [as proposed in **Exhibit 4**]. **Motion Carried**.

Assistant City Attorney Stephen Conteagüero read into the record the title of Ordinance No. 1331 as follows: "**AN ORDINANCE OF THE CITY COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF OKEECHOBEE, FL; LEVYING THE AD VALOREM PROPERTY TAX MILLAGE RATE FOR MUNICIPAL PURPOSES ON ALL TAXABLE PROPERTY WITHIN THE CITY IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE PROVISIONS OF STATE LAW FOR THE FY BEGINNING OCTOBER 1, 2026, AND ENDING SEPTEMBER 30, 2027; PROVIDING THAT 5.8321 PER THOUSAND DOLLAR VALUATION SHALL NOT BE LEVIED ON HOMESTEAD PROPERTY; THAT 5.8321 VALUATION SHALL BE USED FOR GENERAL CITY PURPOSES; THAT SAID MILLAGE RATE IS 0.00 PERCENT MORE THAN THE ROLL-BACK RATE OF 5.8321 COMPUTED IN ACCORDANCE WITH FS 200.065(1); PROVIDING FOR CONFLICT; PROVIDING FOR SEVERABILITY; AND PROVIDING FOR AN EFFECTIVE DATE**."

VII. FY 2026-27 FINAL BUDGET PUBLIC HEARING CONTINUED

C. Continued. Council Member Chandler made a motion, seconded by Council Member Jarriel to approve the second reading and adopt proposed Ordinance No. 1331. No comments or questions were offered from the Public.

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

D. Council Member McAuley made a motion, seconded by Council Member Chandler to read by title only, proposed Ordinance No. 1332, setting the annual Budget for FY October 1, 2026, through September 30, 2027 [as proposed in **Exhibit 5**]. **Motion Carried**.

Assistant City Attorney Conteagüero read into the record the title of Ordinance No. 1332 as follows: "**AN ORDINANCE ADOPTING AN ANNUAL BUDGET FOR THE CITY OF OKEECHOBEE, FL; FOR THE FY BEGINNING OCTOBER 1, 2026, AND ENDING SEPTEMBER 30, 2027; APPROPRIATING FUNDS FOR OPERATING EXPENSES OF THE CITY OF OKEECHOBEE FOR THE GENERAL OPERATION OF THE SEVERAL DEPARTMENTS OF THE CITY AND OTHER FIXED OBLIGATIONS OF THE CITY FOR AND DURING THE FY; PROVIDING FOR CONFLICT AND SEVERABILITY; AND PROVIDING FOR AN EFFECTIVE DATE.**"

Council Member Jarriel made a motion, seconded by Council Member Chandler to approve the second reading and adopt proposed Ordinance No. 1332. No comments or questions were offered from the Public.

The **General Fund** budget figures were presented as follows: beginning Fund Balance, $4,342,502.00; projected Revenues, $13,195,787.00; estimated Expenditures, $9,153,285.00; $300,000.00 to be transferred in from the Public Facilities Improvement (Transportation) Fund. Fund Balance, $4,342,502.00. Expenditures within the General Fund budget are listed by department below:

0511-Legislative/City Council	Total Personnel:	$ 81,900.00
	Total Operating:	$ 94,100.00
	FY 2026-27 Proposed Total:	**$ 176,000.00**

Scrivener's Error, should be 3.4% CPI increase.

This departmental budget includes a ~~3.84~~ 3.4 percent salary increase for the Mayor and City Council positions based on the U.S. Consumer Price Index pursuant to Charter Section C-2.6, $4,000.00 funding for the Okeechobee Education Foundation, and $40,000.00 funding for the Okeechobee County Economic Development Corporation.

The remaining departmental budgets include salary adjustments as follows: a 2.5 percent general wage increase effective October 1, 2026, and an up to 2 percent merit increase effective June , 2027 with a satisfactory evaluation. Personnel staffing changes include adding a Crime Scene Tech/Evidence Clerk position to the Police Department, the City Clerk position will change from an elected position to an appointed position effective January 4, 2027.

0512-Executive/Administration	Total Personnel:	$ 234,250.00
	Total Operating:	$ 74,200.00
	FY 2026-27 Proposed Total:	**$ 308,450.00**
1512-Executive/Human Resources	Total Personnel:	$ 84,150.00
	Total Operating:	$ 28,000.00
	FY 2026-27 Proposed Total:	**$ 112,150.00**
2512-Executive/City Clerk	Total Personnel:	$ 302,900.00
	Total Operating:	$ 84,350.00
	FY 2026-27 Proposed Total:	**$ 387,250.00**
0513-Finance	Total Personnel:	$ 268,350.00
	Total Operating:	$ 120,550.00
	FY 2026-27 Proposed Total:	**$ 388,900.00**
0514-Legal Services	**FY 2026-27 Proposed Total:**	**$ 140,950.00**
0519-General Services	Total Personnel:	$ 232,100.00
	Total Operating:	$ 481,600.00
	FY 2026-27 Proposed Total:	**$ 713,700.00**
0521-Police Department	Total Personnel:	$ 3,398,980.00
	Total Operating:	$ 614,650.00
	FY 2026-27 Proposed Total:	**$ 4,013,630.00**

VII. FY 2026-27 FINAL BUDGET PUBLIC HEARING CONTINUED

D. Continued, General Fund Expenditures:

0522-Fire and 0529-Public Safety	Total Personnel (Retirement):	$ 55,000.00
	Fire Contractual Services:	$ 928,205.00
	Operating for Public Safety Building:	$ 54,500.00
	FY 2026-27 Proposed Total:	**$ 1,037,705.00**
0541-Public Works	Total Personnel:	$ 829,500.00
	Total Operating:	$ 1,045,050.00
	FY 2026-27 Proposed Total:	**$ 1,874,550.00**

The **Public Facilities Improvement (Transportation) Fund** beginning Fund Balance, $419,982.00; estimated Revenues, $787,500.00; projected Expenditures, $812,500.00; plus $300,000.00 to be transferred into the General Fund. Fund Balance, $94,982.00.

The **Capital Improvement Projects Fund** beginning Fund Balance, $2,508,367.00; estimated Revenues, $40,000.00; projected Expenditures, $1,355,000.00. Fund Balance, $1,193,367.00. Amounts earmarked for Departments are: Finance, $20,000.00 for interior renovations and office furniture; General Services, $50,000.00 for City Hall landscaping and parking lot light poles replaced; Law Enforcement, $235,000.00 for four new patrol cars and equipment; Public Works, $25,000.00 for a new utility trailer, office furniture, and security scan entry doors for the Cleveland Lamb Public Works Facility; and $1,000,000.00 for road infrastructure improvements.

The **Other Grant Capital Funds**. Accounts 305 Industrial Development Grants Fund (American Resue Plan Act) and 307 Appropriations Grant Fund (Florida Department of Commerce) are anticipated to have all revenues expended in FY 2025-26. At this time the only remaining active Grant Fund will be Account 309, for the City Hall and Public Safety Building Hardening Projects. State Grants Revenues, $1,971,515.00; projected Expenditures, $1,971,515.00. leaving a zero Fund Balance.

The **Law Enforcement Special Fund** beginning Fund Balance, $12,900.00; projected Revenues, $1,000.00; projected Expenditures, $6,000.00. Fund Balance, $7,900.00.

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

[A final complete Budget Booklet was distributed by Finance Director Connell at the end of the meeting; a copy has been added to **Exhibit 5**.]

MAYOR WATFORD CLOSED THE FY 2026-27 FINAL BUDGET PUBLIC HEARING AT 6:41 P.M.

VIII. NEW BUSINESS

A. Council Member McAuley made a motion, seconded by Council Member Chandler to read by title only, proposed Ordinance No. 1334, rezoning Lots 1 to 4 and 7 to 12, of Block 80, CITY OF OKEECHOBEE, Plat Book 5, Page 5, Okeechobee County public records; 1.61+/- acres, located between NE 4th to 5th AVE and NE 6th to 7th ST; from Residential Single Family-One (RSF-1) to IND, Rezoning Petition No. 26-001-R submitted by Mr. Jeffrey Sumner, Agent on behalf of the property owner, Diamond R. Fertilizer Co., Inc. The proposed use is to expand the existing Diamond R business, including storage and retail sales [as presented in **Exhibit 6**]. **Motion Carried**.

Assistant City Attorney Conteagüero read into the record the title of Ordinance No. 1334 as follows: "**AN ORDINANCE OF THE CITY OF OKEECHOBEE, FL; AMENDING THE OFFICIAL ZONING MAP OF THE CITY OF OKEECHOBEE BY REZONING A CERTAIN TRACT OF LAND MORE PARTICULARLY DESCRIBED HEREIN, FROM RSF-1 TO IND; PETITION NO. 26-001-R; AMENDING THE ZONING MAP ACCORDINGLY; PROVIDING FOR CONFLICT; PROVIDING FOR SEVERABILITY; PROVIDING FOR AN EFFECTIVE DATE.**"

Council Member Chandler made a motion, seconded by Council Member Jarriel to approve the first reading, and set October 20, 2026, as the final Public Hearing date for proposed Ordinance No. 1334. Planner Fewell reviewed the highlights of the Planning Staff report.

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

B. Council Member Chandler made a motion, seconded by Council Member Jarriel to enter into an Agreement with Proctor Construction Company, LLC to improve the Public Safety Building (Grant Agreement No. FM1252) in the amount of $687,430.00 not to exceed $703,157.00 [as presented in **Exhibit 7**]. **Motion Carried**.

VIII. NEW BUSINESS CONTINUED

C. Council Member McAuley made a motion, seconded by Council Member Jarriel to adopt a new Budget Transfer [Administrative] Policy [as presented in **Exhibit 8**]. **Motion Carried**.

D. Council Member Jarriel made a motion, seconded by Council Member McAuley to authorize staff to identify and secure a qualified Code Enforcement Magistrate backup [as presented in **Exhibit 9**]. **Motion Carried**.

E. Council Member Chandler made a motion, seconded by Council Member Jarriel to adopt Resolution No. 2026-09 authorizing the execution and acceptance of Agreement No. BEL16 with Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT) for [continued] maintenance and beautification along State Roads within the City Limits [for a new three year service term covering FYs 2026-27 through 2028-29, with the option for a mutually agreed upon three year renewal term covering FYs 2029-30 through 2031-32, as presented in **Exhibit 10**].

Assistant City Attorney Conteagüero read into the record the title of Resolution No. 2026-09 as follows: "**A RESOLUTION OF THE CITY OF OKEECHOBEE, FL; AUTHORIZING THE MAYOR AND CITY CLERK TO EXECUTE A MEMORANDUM OF AGREEMENT (NO. BEL 16) WITH THE FDOT FOR ROADWAY MAINTENANCE SERVICES WITHIN THE CITY'S CORPORATE LIMITS; PROVIDING FOR AN EFFECTIVE DATE.**" **Motion Carried**.

IX. CITY ATTORNEY UPDATE

A copy of the written update, as read by Assistant City Attorney Conteagüero, was added to the official Minute File, labeled as **Exhibit 11**.

- The Technical Review Committee revamp has been reviewed by Planning Staff and will be presented to the City Council soon.
- One of the two required firms to complete the real estate appraisal on the American Legion property have been retained.
- Currently working on the solicitations for the Code Enforcement Magistrate backup.

X. CITY ADMINISTRATOR UPDATE

- Distributed the August 2026 Monthly Department Report and briefly highlighted key updates from each department. A copy of the six-page report was added and labeled as **Exhibit 12** in the official Minute File.
- Received praise from the County on the "If I Were Mayor" Essay Contest following its Facebook announcement for FL Cities Week. Credit was given to Assistant Deputy City Clerk Jessica Rickards for conceiving and leading the initiative.
- Secured initial sponsorships from FL Power and Light and the Okeechobee Historical Society for the City's 100-Year Building Celebration and Festival.
- Currently drafting policies with IT Technician Carl Fox for upcoming adoption. The Policies will expand the cybersecurity training and periodic phishing tests mandates for all employees.
- Posted and advertised the City Clerk role across multiple channels resulting in a strong early pool of applicants.
- Select staff met last week to review the Strategic Plan Community Survey responses. The results of the survey and ideas from staff will be presented at an upcoming City Council meeting.
- Applying for two FL Recreation Development Assistance Program grants to fund improvements in FLAGLER PARKs and Centennial Park.
- Recognized the Police Department for hosting a successful community engagement School Supply Drive in August.
- Looking to partner with CivicPlus on a comprehensive contract to redesign the City's website and implement software applications that will benefit the City Clerk's Office, Code Enforcement, and General Services.
- Expressed appreciation to Libby Pigman for providing useful details on how residents can report drainage issues to SFWMD.
- The Okeechobee High School Junior Class is using a bay in the Public Safety Building to construct their homecoming float.
- Distributed the preliminary 2026-27 Resurfacing Projects list to the City Council. A copy of the document was added to **Exhibit 12**.

XI. COUNCIL COMMENTS

- Council Member Chandler inquired about the purpose of the Xfinity fiber optic lines being installed throughout the City. Administrator Whitehead advised the installation of the lines will benefit each City facility, and the Emergency Operations Center; however, local citizens will not be forced to connect to Xfinity's service, nor will they be charged for not connecting.

XI. COUNCIL COMMENTS CONTINUED

- Council Member Jarriel praised the Public Works Department, and Director Hall, for their quick response to drainage and citizen concerns.
- Council Member McAuley thanked staff for purchasing the new chairs at the dais.

XII. ADJOURNMENT

There being no further items of discussion, Mayor Watford adjourned the meeting at 7:24 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.