



CITY OF OKEECHOBEE, FLORIDA
JULY 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 July 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 Mayor Watford; followed by the Pledge of Allegiance led by Vice Mayor Clark.

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A. One modification was made to the published revised agenda, New Business item VII.E. was withdrawn. Additional pages were added to Exhibit 7; Exhibits 10, 11, and 12 were added and noted with their items.

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

C. No comment cards were received for public participation for issues not on the agenda. However, Mrs. Amy Fipps was offered the floor by Mayor Watford. She introduced herself as the newest Executive Director for the Economic Council of Okeechobee (ECO) and stated she is looking forward to working with the City Council and staff in the future.

IV. CONSENT AGENDA

A. Motion by Vice Mayor Clark, seconded by Council Member Jarriel to approve the June 2026 Warrant Register [in the amounts of General Fund, \$522,616.38; Appropriations Grant Fund, \$238,1185.90; Other Grant Capital Fund, \$163,247.92; Capital Improvement Projects Fund, \$19,798.00; and Public Facilities Improvement Fund, \$9,386.10; as presented in **Exhibit 1**].
Motion Carried Unanimously.

V. MAYOR WATFORD OPENED THE TRANSMITTAL PUBLIC HEARING FOR COMPREHENSIVE PLAN AMENDMENTS AT 6:06 P.M.

A. Motion by Council Member Jarriel, seconded by Council Member Chandler to read by title only, proposed Ordinance No. 1330, providing Text Amendments to the Comprehensive Plan Future Land Use (FLU) Element Policy 2.1, the Mixed Use Planned Unit Development (PUD) classifications on the FLU Map, and the Commercial Use designations, City initiated Application No. 26-001-CPA [as presented in **Exhibit 2**].
Motion Carried Unanimously.

City Clerk Gamiotea read into the record the title of proposed Ordinance No. 1330 as follows: "**AN ORDINANCE OF THE CITY OF OKEECHOBEE, FL, UPDATING THE FLU ELEMENT OF THE CITY'S COMPREHENSIVE PLAN FLU POLICY NUMBER 2.1 TO AMEND THE MIXED USE RESIDENTIAL LAND USE DESIGNATION AND THE COMMERCIAL LAND USE DESIGNATION, APPLICATION NO. 26-001-CPA; PROVIDING FOR CONFLICT; PROVIDING FOR SEVERABILITY; AND PROVIDING AN EFFECTIVE DATE.**"

Motion by Council Member Chandler, seconded by Council Member Jarriel to approve for Transmittal to the State for Expedited Review, proposed Ordinance No. 1330.

Attending remotely, City Planner Ben Smith of Morris-Depew and Associates, 2914 Cleveland AVE, Fort Myers, FL 33901, reviewed the highlights of the Planning Staff Report. The Planning Board and Planning Staff determined the Application is in the best interest of the City. The proposed Amendments, in conjunction with companion Land Development Regulations (LDR) Text Amendments to the PUD Zoning Districts, are intended to streamline, clarify, and modernize the City's policies and Codes for PUDs. The proposed language is significantly more concise and is expected to provide the flexibility that was originally intended for this land use category. Residential land uses are permitted but not required. Commercial land uses are permitted but not required. Mixed Use is now encouraged and incentivized, though not required.

V. TRANSMITTAL PUBLIC HEARING CONTINUED

- A. Continued. The Commercial FLU category allows a higher Floor Area Ratio (FAR) of 3.0 than the Mixed Use FLU category and the Multi-Family Residential FLU category allows higher standard density of 10 dwelling units per acre than the Mixed Use FLU category. The minimum acreage requirement is removed. Maximum standard density remains at 7.5 dwelling units per gross acre. An opportunity for bonus density is contemplated, with implementation details that would need to be accomplished within the LDRs. Maximum non-residential intensity remains at 0.35 FAR. Requirements related to stormwater management, open space, and other specific design considerations will be regulated by the LDRs as well as applicable State and Federal requirements.

Vice Mayor Clark made a motion, seconded by Council Member Jarriel to amend proposed Ordinance No. 1330, Exhibit A, Policy 2.1, under paragraph c), to delete the proposed added language in paragraph 5., and amend under d) paragraph 3., removing the words "and Mixed Use future land use" and changing 395 acres to 355. The sentence will read: "The combined total area within the City of Okeechobee designated Commercial FLU shall not be reduced to less than 355 acres."

Motion to Amend Carried Unanimously.

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

MAYOR WATFORD CLOSED THE TRANSMITTAL PUBLIC HEARING AT 6:41 P.M.

VI. MAYOR WATFORD OPENED THE PUBLIC HEARING FOR LDR AMENDMENTS AT 6:41 P.M.

- A. Motion by Vice Mayor Clark, seconded by Council Member Jarriel to read by title only, proposed Ordinance No. 1329, providing for Text Amendments to the LDRs Definitions Section 66-1, Mixed-Use and Residential PUDs and their Permitted Uses, Code Sections to be amended are 90-416 through 90-419, and 90-428 through 90-434, as requested in Application No. 25-001-TA submitted by Erin Lees of WGI, Inc., on behalf of the Applicant, Edison Real Estate Partners, LLC [as presented in **Exhibit 3**].

Motion Carried Unanimously.

City Clerk Gamiotea read into the record the title of proposed Ordinance No. 1329 as follows: **"AN ORDINANCE OF THE CITY OF OKEECHOBEE, FL; PROVIDING FOR AMENDMENT TO PART II OF THE CITY OF OKEECHOBEE CODE OF ORDINANCES, SUBPART B - LDRS, WITHIN CHAPTER 66 - GENERAL PROVISIONS, SPECIFICALLY AMENDING SECTION 66-1. - DEFINITIONS PROVIDING FOR AMENDMENTS TO CHAPTER 90 - ZONING, ARTICLE III. - DISTRICTS AND DISTRICT REGULATIONS, DIVISION 13. - RESIDENTIAL PUD DISTRICT SPECIFICALLY AMENDING SECTIONS 90-416. - GENERALLY AND 90-417. - PERMITTED USES, RENAMING AND AMENDING SECTION 90-418. - FROM DIMENSIONAL TO DEVELOPMENT STANDARDS, AMENDMENT TO SECTION 90-419(1). - ADDITIONAL REGULATIONS; PROVIDING FOR FURTHER AMENDMENTS TO SAID CHAPTER 90, DIVISION 14. - REGULATIONS APPLICABLE TO ALL MIXED USE PUD AND RESIDENTIAL PUD DISTRICTS, SPECIFICALLY AMENDING SECTIONS 90-428. - GENERAL DEVELOPMENT REVIEW STANDARDS, 90-429. - PETITION REQUIREMENTS FOR REZONING TO PUD-M OR PUD-R DISTRICT, 90-430. - OTHER REQUIREMENTS AND CONDITIONS, 90-431. - STATUS OF AN APPROVED PUD-M OR PUD-R DEVELOPMENT, 90-432. - REVIEW AND APPROVAL PROCESS FOR REZONING PUD-M AND PUD-R ZONING DISTRICTS, 90-433. - AMENDING AN APPROVED PLANNED DEVELOPMENT, AND ADDING SECTION 90-434. - DEVIATIONS, AS SUBMITTED IN LDR TEXT AMENDMENT APPLICATION NO. 25-001-TA; PROVIDING FOR CONFLICT; PROVIDING FOR CODIFICATION; PROVIDING FOR SEVERABILITY; PROVIDING FOR AN EFFECTIVE DATE."**

Motion by Council Member Chandler, seconded by Council Member Jarriel to approve the first reading, and set August 18, 2026, as the final Public Hearing adoption date for proposed Ordinance No. 1329.

City Planner Smith reviewed the highlights of the Planning Staff Report. The Applicant, current property owner of the Blue Heron Golf and Country Club amenities, and multiple residents of Blue Heron were in attendance.

Mr. Frank Irby, of 1385 SE 23rd Street, Okeechobee, FL 34974, asked (in Ordinance No. 1329, pages 3 and 4, Code Section 90-418, Development Standards) whether the minimum 12-foot separation between buildings in paragraph (6) conflicted with the requirements in paragraph (5). The answer was that the setbacks from the lot line would have to be met as well as the distance between more than one building on a lot/parcel. Mr. Irby asked, (on page 5, Code Section 90-428, General Development Review Standards) paragraph (2), who would decide whether the new development was compatible and its relationship with adjacent property? Mayor Watford responded the Planning Board and ultimately the City Council.

VI. PUBLIC HEARING FOR LDR AMENDMENTS CONTINUED

- A. Continued. Planner Smith added, the Florida Statutes were recently amended, preempting what local governments can do/require in the name of compatibility. Planner Smith also confirmed Mr. Irby was correct in his understanding that under the PUD zoning, there cannot be deviations in density.

Vice Mayor Clark made a motion, seconded by Council Member Jarriel to amend proposed Ordinance No. 1329, Section 3, Code Section 90-418, to insert the appropriate language that will require any single family or multi-family dwelling unit to be at least 1,000 sq. ft. in size.
Motion to Amend Carried Unanimously.

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

- B. Motion by Council Member Chandler, seconded by Vice Mayor Clark to read by title only, proposed Ordinance No. 1328, providing Text Amendments to the LDRs Mixed Use PUDs and the Permitted Uses, Code Sections to be amended are 90-401 through 90-415, as requested in City initiated Application No. 26-001-TA [as presented in **Exhibit 4**].
Motion Carried Unanimously.

City Clerk Gamiotea read into the record the title of proposed Ordinance No. 1328 as follows: **“AN ORDINANCE OF THE CITY OF OKEECHOBEE, FL; PROVIDING FOR AMENDMENT TO PART II OF THE CITY OF OKEECHOBEE CODE OF ORDINANCES, SUBPART - B LDRS, WITHIN CHAPTER 90 - ZONING, ARTICLE III. - DISTRICTS AND DISTRICT REGULATIONS, DIVISION 12. - MIXED-USE PUD DISTRICT BY SPECIFICALLY AMENDING SECTIONS 90-401. - GENERALLY AND 90-402. - PERMITTED USES, DELETE SECTION 90-403. - CUSTOMARY ACCESSORY USES, RENUMBER AND RENAME SECTION 90-404 FROM DIMENSIONAL REQUIREMENTS TO 90-403. - DEVELOPMENT STANDARDS, RENUMBER SECTION 90-405 TO 90-404. - ADDITIONAL REGULATIONS, AND RENUMBER SECTION 90-406 THROUGH 90-415 TO 90-405 THROUGH 90-415. - RESERVED, AS SUBMITTED IN LDR TEXT AMENDMENT APPLICATION NO. 26-001-TA; PROVIDING FOR CONFLICT; PROVIDING FOR CODIFICATION; PROVIDING FOR SEVERABILITY; PROVIDING FOR AN EFFECTIVE DATE.”**

Motion by Council Member McAuley, seconded by Council Member Chandler to approve the first reading, and set August 18, 2026, as the final Public Hearing adoption date for proposed Ordinance No. 1328.

City Planner Smith reviewed the highlights of the Planning Staff Report. There were no comments from the Public.

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

MAYOR WATFORD CLOSED THE PUBLIC HEARING FOR LDR AMENDMENTS AT 7:26 P.M.

VII. NEW BUSINESS

- A. Mrs. Kaylee King, President of the Okeechobee County Economic Development Corporation (OCEDC), presented a quarterly update which included a brief overview of their mission, purpose, and membership. Activity in the second quarter of this year included attending 35 business meetings, 27 active projects, 11 speaking engagements and events, one site visit, and obtaining a new grant matrix. Ongoing projects include Business Retention and Expansion Program, the Okeechobee Junior Leadership Program, the annual Okeechobee Touch-a-Truck event, as well as continuing its membership with the Culture of Collaboration and Christmas in Okeechobee. The OCEDC is currently updating their website by enabling interactive elements and will also be updating their Strategic Plan this Fall. Lastly, the OCEDC has two Requests for Information pending with corporations looking to expand into FL. A copy of the PowerPoint slides was provided in **Exhibit 5**.
No action taken, this item was for informational purposes only.

MAYOR WATFORD RECESSED THE MEETING AT 7:50 P.M. AND RECONVENED AT 7:58 P.M.

- B. Motion by Council Member Jarriel, seconded by Council Member McAuley to approve the Budget Calendar for the Fiscal Year (FY) 2026-27 setting the maximum millage rate at a City Council Special Meeting on July 29, 2026, at [commencing at] 5:01 P.M. [or as soon thereafter]; [hold] a Budget Workshop on August 4, 2026, following the City Council Regular Meeting commencing at 5:00 P.M. [or as soon thereafter]; (IF NECESSARY hold) a Budget Workshop on August 18, 2026, following the City Council Regular Meeting commencing at 6:00 P.M. [or as soon thereafter]; [hold] the First Budget Public Hearing on September 1, 2026, [commencing] at 6:00 P.M. [or as soon thereafter] during the City Council Regular Meeting; reschedule the September 15, 2026, City Council Regular Meeting;

VII. NEW BUSINESS CONTINUED

- B. Continued. and conduct the Final Budget Public Hearing on September 21, 2026, [commencing] at 6:00 P.M. [or as soon thereafter], during the rescheduled Regular Meeting, [as presented in **Exhibit 6**].

Motion Carried Unanimously.

- C. Finance Director Mr. Taylor Connell provided an encouraging overview of the City's 2,835 parcel tax base by type of use, adopted millage rates, and how we - the City - compared to similar municipalities. The largest portion of the City's parcel tax base is residential, approximately 63 percent. Within the residential properties, taxable assessments remain concentrated within the lower to moderate value ranges (see chart on page 2, Exhibit 7). Approximately 88 percent of the residential parcels have a taxable value below \$250,000.00. The data reflects a broad residential tax base that continues to support long-term financial stability for the City. Commercial properties make up almost 18 percent. The broad range of values (see chart on page 3, Exhibit 7) reflects a diverse, healthy commercial sector, and reduces the reliance on any single property type.

Over the past five years, the City's taxable value has increased steadily from \$351,992,688.00 in 2021 to \$568,609,684.00 in 2026, an overall increase of approximately 61.5 percent. During the same period, the City Council has consistently reduced the millage rate from 7.6018 mills in 2021 to 5.9602 in 2025, an overall decrease by 21.6 percent.

Our Property values have grown at a pace similar in the rest of the State. However, the City has reduced its millage rate much more aggressively, by 19.1 percent compared to the statewide municipal average of only 3 percent, more than any comparable municipality reviewed by staff. This demonstrates the City's continued commitment to responsible financial management and a commitment to balancing growth with tax relief for property owners.

City staff identified 20 other municipalities of similar populations and community characteristics to create a peer group for analysis. The comparison of the data showed 14 of those cities adopted higher millage rates, while six adopted lower rates. This places the City in the lower half of the peer group, indicating the City's tax rate is comparatively modest relative to similar sized municipalities. It also illustrates the wide range of tax rates among comparable cities. While the millage rate does not account for differences in taxable value, service levels, infrastructure obligations, pension costs, debt service or other local fiscal conditions, it does provide a useful benchmark to evaluate the City's tax position. He then provided a spreadsheet that showed the top 20 municipalities in the State that lowered their millage rate between 2021 to 2025. The City ranked 14th, further when compared of all the 411 other municipalities in the State, the City reduced its millage rate more than 96.6 percent than the other cities. When compared to the peer group, eight cities had no change in their millage rate between 2021 and 2025; six increased their millage rate, the City of Avon Park was the highest from 2.24 to 6.00 mills, a 167.9 percent increase. Of the seven who reduced their millage, we were the most reduced. Mr. Connell, read into the record, a news article quote by a Deputy Mayor of a similarly sized city, "We are basically in a situation now where we are trying to catch up from past administrations that had taxes so low we could no longer maintain the City's streets and maintenance on vehicles or even keep employees. We are trying to catch up from mistakes that I think were mistakes in the past. One thing I hate to do is to raise taxes because it raises taxes on myself and I don't like that either."

Finance Director Connell stated in closing, the City has continually lowered its millage rate since 2021 while also improving and maintaining FLAGLER PARK, Centennial Park, and the City's infrastructure, showing it can be accomplished. However, we need to keep the words of the Deputy Mayor in mind as a cautionary tale. The City staff will be recommending the maximum Millage Rate advertisement to be at the current rate, 5.9602.

[The two pages distributed at the meeting, and news article were added to the materials provided in **Exhibit 7**]. **No action was taken, this was for informational purposes in relation to the action to be taken at the Special Meeting on July 29, 2026, as well as the Budget Workshops and Public Hearings.**

- D. City Administrator, Ms. Denise Whitehead, presented information for the upcoming Budget Workshops in August, and Public Hearings in September, **Exhibit 8**. The proposed Budget for FY 2026-27 is being developed based on a millage rate of 5.9602 (current rate). This can be amended as necessary while working through the Budget process by City Council direction. Additionally, the proposed Budget is being developed with the following anticipated costs: a 2.5 percent Salary Cost-of-Living-Adjustment effective October 1, 2026, and an up to 2 percent Merit Salary increase effective June 1, 2027, with the proper Evaluation, for all employees excluding the Mayor and City Council. A 5.71 percent contribution for the General Employees' Retirement System and a 14.99 percent contribution for the Municipal Police Officers' and Firefighters' Pension.

VII. NEW BUSINESS CONTINUED

- D. Continued. A 2 percent increase in Life and Health Insurance coverage. The Property Liability and Workers' Compensation Insurance premiums remained the same at \$219,000.00 and \$154,000.00 respectively. Add two new positions in the Police Department, an Evidence/Crime Scene Technician with a Pay Grade of 105 and starting salary of \$50,194.35, and a second School Resource Officer (SRO) with a starting salary of \$54,490.80. The SRO position will only be partially budgeted for in FY 2026-27, as the position will not start until July 2027.

Capital Improvement requests for \$10,000.00 or more: \$17,000.00 for Finance Department office renovations; \$40,000.00 for City Hall landscaping; \$10,000.00 for upgrades to the lighting in the City Hall parking area (along North Park Street); four new Police vehicles, \$190,000.00 and \$28,000.00 for vehicle equipment; \$13,000.00 for security upgrades at the entrance of the Cleveland Lamb Public Works Facility; \$25,000.00 for City-wide software updates; and \$1,000,000.00 for the ongoing Roadway Improvements throughout the City.

The floor was opened for questions on the above proposed items, there were none. Administrator Whitehead asked the City Council to contact her or Finance Director Connell with any questions prior to the July 29, 2026, Special Meeting.

- E. The motion to approve a Right-of-Way Dedication by Park Street Property Owners Association, Inc., to the City, a Roadway Tract, PARK STREET COMMERCE CENTER, Plat Book 8, Page 91, Okeechobee County public records, was withdrawn by Assistant City Attorney Stephen Conteagüero, via email, citing documents were not provided by the requestor. A copy of the email has been added to the official Minute File, labeled **Exhibit 10**.
- F. Motion by Council Member Jarriel, seconded by Council Member McAuley to approve an Agreement with Fetterman Law [for Risk Protection Order Services for the Police Department. The document provided in **Exhibit 9** is not the final to be executed, as it was revised by the City Attorney; the fees could be lower, the amount provided is the maximum the services will cost; and the signature block will be corrected to reflect City Administrator as the signee].

Motion Carried Unanimously.

VIII. CITY ATTORNEY UPDATE

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

- The Fetterman Law Agreement was reviewed for legal sufficiency.
- The meeting with Planning Staff regarding the removal of the Technical Review Committee (TRC) from under the purview of Sunshine Law requirements went well. Amendments are still coming to make this change to the Code.
- Advised he is working with the property owners of the Park Street Commerce Center on the Right-of-Way Roadway Tract Dedication to the City. There was a hold-up with their mortgage, which is what caused the item to be withdrawn from tonight's agenda.

IX. CITY ADMINISTRATOR UPDATE

- Thanked the Public Works staff for their diligent work at the Chamber of Commerce. She advised that more material had to be replaced than originally anticipated, so adding the small buffer into their work estimate has been beneficial.
- Also gave a public kudos to Public Works staff Wade Wheeler, Brandon Suer, Mick Lizzano, and Kevin Boswell, she received a call from a citizen commending their good work in his neighborhood.
- Advised the TRC restructuring will be brought to the City Council as well as updates to the City's Drug Use Policy for review.
- Distributed a one-page quote for proposed lighting for the 100 Year Building Celebration and additional Christmas Lighting options for City Hall from the current vendor, Shellard Lighting Designs, LLC. Administrator Whitehead asked the City Council for a consensus whether or not to incorporate any of the options so it could be included in the proposed Budget for the August 4, 2026, Workshop. The majority of the City Council noted their interest in the 100 Years lighting. It was unclear whether there was a majority consensus for uplighting on the City Hall building, but there was a clear majority that did not want to incur the costs to have the lamp posts in the City Hall parking lot along North Park Street with lighted decorations. [The page has been added to the official Minute File and labeled **Exhibit 12**].
- Reminded the City Council that the Special Meeting, scheduled for July 29, 2026, begins at 5:01 P.M., as well as Okeechobee Mainstreet's Christmas in July event being held at OK Corral Gun Club from 5:00 to 7:00 P.M., and the Ribbon Cutting Ceremony at the new Okeechobee High School at 6:00 P.M. August 4, 2026, will be the first Budget Workshop, this meeting will begin at 5:00 P.M.
- Extended her gratitude to City staff for the warm welcome she received.

IX. COUNCIL COMMENTS

- Council Member Chandler stated tonight's meeting was very informative, and that staff keeps the City Council looking sharp and out of trouble.
- Council Member Jarriel agreed with Council Member Chandler.
- Council Member McAuley stated all is well with him.
- Vice Mayor Clark noted the effect Amendment No. 3 will have on the City, and the ECO needs to make sure citizens are well informed.
- Mayor Watford stated he was glad Council Member Jarriel was doing better and then thanked all who helped arrange, kept the secret, and attended City Administrator Gary Ritter's Surprise Retirement Party.

X. ADJOURNMENT

There being no further items, Mayor Watford adjourned the meeting at 8:47 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.