Commission Meeting Minutes
July 11, 2023
5:30 pm

Mayor Scott Roberts said before we begin the official meeting of the Starke City Commission there will be a time of voluntary prayer. Those willing to do so are asked to stand and I will lead us in prayer and the Pledge of Allegiance.

Mayor Roberts called the meeting to order at 5:30 pm.

This meeting was the only regular meeting of the month. Members attending included Mayor Scott Roberts, Commissioner Janice D. Mortimer, Commissioner Danny Nugent, Commissioner Andy Redding and Commissioner Shannon Smith. Also present were Executive Assistant Cathy Bradley, City Clerk Jimmy Crosby, Finance Consultant Jim Farrell, Deputy Clerk Lisa Heeder, Finance Director James Hughes, Police Chief Jeff Johnson, Attorney Clay Martin, City Manager Drew Mullins and Fire Chief Gary Wise.

Mayor Roberts asked if there were any changes, additions or deletions to the agenda. Clerk Crosby asked to remove item 4.B from the consent agenda and make it item 8.A.1. and remove item 4.C. from the consent agenda and make it item 8.A.2. for public presentations. Mayor Roberts entertained a motion. Commissioner Smith made a motion. It was seconded by Commissioner Redding. The motion passed 5-0.

Mayor Roberts entertained a motion to approve the consent agenda. The consent agenda consisted of the minutes of the June 20, 2023 Commission Meeting, Resolution Number 2023-45 approving the amendment to the Traffic Signal Maintenance and Compensation Agreement, Resolution Number 2023-46 authorizing the expenditure of funds pursuant to an eminent domain proceeding, Resolution Number 2023-47 approval of ICE Engineering continuing contract, Resolution Number 2023-48 approval of the ICE Engineering CDBG contract and the commissioner bill review. Commissioner Nugent made a motion to approve the consent agenda. It was seconded by Commissioner Mortimer. The motion passed 5-0.

Mayor Roberts asked for emergency items. There were none.

Mayor Roberts asked for old business. There was none.

Mayor Roberts read the statement for citizen requests "The City of Starke welcomes you to this meeting. This time is set aside for our citizens and general public to address the city commission. This is not a question or answer time. It is not a political forum, nor is it a time for personal accusations or derogatory remarks to or about city personnel. If you would like to address the commission, please complete a form, come to the podium when you are called, speak into the microphone and state your name and address for the record. Please also limit your comments to not more than three minutes. Your participation is welcomed." He asked if Heather Arthur or Jeremy Boyer were present. They were not.

Mayor Roberts called for Resolution Number 2023-43 approving the Drinking Water Facilities Plan pursuant to the requirements of the Florida Department of Environmental Protection. Justin deMello with Woodard & Curran came in to evaluate the facilities plan, the city's needs and capital and long term costs. The needs are to upgrade the existing water plant, the distribution system and address water pressure issues and upgrading meters. Mr. deMello said the existing facilities are in pretty good shape so upgrading is the recommendation. He said the second project is a new elevated storage tank out by the bypass. Mr. deMello said most meters are manual reads. He said older meters slow down causing lost revenue. Advanced Meter Infrastructure Systems allow for reading meters electronically. Mr. deMello said the cost for the total project is $14,309,800. He said the project should be completed in October of 2026. Mr. deMello said the environmental review did not find any environmental conflicts. He said there are no known rate increases at this time. Mr. deMello asked for comments from the public or commission. Commissioner Nugent said they looked into the electronic meters years ago and didn't have the population to justify it. Mr. deMello said the State Revolving Fund is committed to replacing aging assets. Mr. Mullins said he replaced meters in a previous town he worked for and they saw a 10% increase in revenue. Commissioner Mortimer asked if additional computer systems will be required. Mr. deMello said yes but they are built into the cost. Mayor Roberts entertained a motion to approve Resolution Number 2023-43. Commissioner Mortimer made a motion. It was seconded by Commissioner Nugent. The motion passed 5-0.

Mayor Roberts called for Resolution Number 2023-44. Mr. deMello said this pertains to the collection system. He said $4,000,000 is earmarked for grant money. Mr. deMello said the project was bid three times and exceeded the budget. Woodard and Curran submitted an application to the Florida Department of Environmental Protection who agreed to an additional loan of $1,570,847. Mr. deMello said he is looking for approval of the resolution. Commissioner Nugent asked Clerk Crosby if they had looked into retainment loans. Clerk Crosby said the money is in the budget you will be considering tonight. Commissioner Mortimer asked if this will this resolve the consent order. Mr. deMello said yes by 2026. Mayor Roberts entertained a motion to approve Resolution Number 2023-44. Commissioner Nugent made a motion. It was seconded by Commissioner Redding. The motion passed 5-0.

Mr. deMello introduced Director of Funding Tami Ray. Mr. deMello said they are painting a vision for the future of downtown Starke. He said by the end of the year the city will be bypassed and overpassed with an estimated 24,000 vehicles bypassing downtown. They do not want it forgotten so they want to create a destination. Mr. deMello said Citywalk preserves old Florida charm with food truck events, and an amphitheater for hosting events. He said they will be looking at land acquisition along Call Street and Alligator Creek, expanding the college campus and creating education opportunities. Mr. deMello displayed a City of Tavares rendering of what they laid out with city commitments and funding. He said Ms. Ray knows how to leverage dollars. Ms. Ray said when they first started working with Tavares there were 5,800 people with $200,000 in tax dollars. She said they pulled $57,000,000 in grants. Ms. Ray said Tavares went from boarded up to vibrant. Ms. Ray said they presented the overpassed and bypassed presentation to Bradford County asking for $4,000,000 in allocated funds. She said they leveraged that toward $2,000,000 in grant funding based on $400,000 committed by the city. Mr. deMello said it cannot be accomplished without a unified commitment by the city. He said they are asking $800,000 per year for 5 years as a local match. Mr. deMello asked if there were any questions. Commissioner Nugent asked what part of downtown will be included. Mr. deMello showed a map of downtown but said lines have not been drawn. Clerk Crosby said the place Commissioner Nugent is talking about is where the roundabout has been talked about. Ms. Ray said they are looking at many areas to improve but a commitment will be needed for 5 years. Commissioner Redding said this requires a commitment and many people here are concerned but this will bring tax dollars and amenities. He asked if they can expand on that. Ms. Ray said you did a fantastic job and this is an investment in the downtown corridor. She said there is a return on investment factor if the city believes in itself. Tavares has more than doubled in population because of activities to encourage people to visit the town through the CRA account. Commissioner Smith asked Mr. deMello if he is asking us to put this in the 2024 or 2025 budget. Mr. deMello said 2024. Commissioner Smith said it looks good but not for the 2024 budget. Mr. deMello said this is an ask. Commissioner Smith thanked Mr. deMello. Mayor Roberts said he thinks we need to start talking now so we can start looking into it. He asked about the CRA and what the process is on that and the timeframe. Ms. Ray said we have not started on the definition of the boundaries. That will be a 3-4 month process. She said it will include rezoning so it will be 6 months to establish the boundaries. Mayor Roberts said he was able to visit Tavares and prior to starting this project no one wanted to go downtown because it was only to visit the jail or the courthouse. He said it seems like a pipedream but it's not. Mayor Roberts is excited about where this can go and appreciates the presentation.

Mayor Roberts asked for the Police presentation. Chief Johnson said they had a tentative budget of $1,596,000 and he is asking for $1,100,000 to keep from losing more officers. He said he has lost 7 officers and is planning on losing 3 more. Chief Johnson asked for a commitment of $1,100,000 for 2023-2024. Mayor Roberts said we will have that in the general discussion. He thanked Chief Johnson. Mayor Roberts opened it up for questions. Commissioner Nugent said we had meeting and approved the police budget where it was at. Commissioner Smith said they did not agree on the budget. Chief Johnson said he was asked to cut $500,000. Commissioner Nugent said it bothers him that they are not sticking to their commitment. Chief Johnson said services will be lost but they will do their best. Commissioner Nugent asked if officers can be replaced. Chief Johnson said they do not have any applications at this time. Commissioner Mortimer asked how Chief Johnson came up with the budget he is requesting. Chief Johnson said he met with his administrators, Mr. Hughes and Mr. Mullins. He said this is it. He can't cut anymore. Commissioner Mortimer said so you are committing. Chief Johnson said yes. Commissioner Mortimer thanked Chief Johnson. Commissioner Redding asked how many staff members will be left. Chief Johnson said 13-14 with himself and Sasha Shreiner. Commissioner Smith said he appreciates the work done on this. Mayor Roberts said he wants to clarify that Chief Johnson came up with this on his own. Chief Johnson said it was his idea and he is asking for a commitment of $1,100,000.

Mayor Roberts said moving on to general discussion. Clerk Crosby said tonight the commissioners have to set a tentative millage before the first public hearing. He said we also need to set a special meeting on September 7, 2023 to present the budget to the public. Clerk Crosby said September 17, 2023 they must adopt a budget. Clerk Crosby asked Mr. Farrell to talk about the millage. He said we need a tentative millage at the end of the presentation and a tentative budget to put the worksheets together for the

August 1, 2023 and notice the September 7, 2023 Thursday meeting. Clerk Crosby asked Mr. Farrell to explain how millage works and what the parameters are. Mr. Farrell said good evening. He said there are 4 rates you can set or anywhere in between. He said there was a $236,722,344 tax base last year and this year's is $252,053,833. Mr. Farrell asked if the commission wants to stay at the current rate which will increase taxes by $74,747. He said the second option is the rollback rate. Mr. Farrell said if you paid $1,000 last year to pay $1,000 this year you must reduce millage. He said the third is the maximum millage rate allowed with a majority vote at 5.4935 increasing the tax amount by $230,542. Mr. Farrell said the fourth option with a two-thirds majority could go with 6.0429 but you cannot go above that or you lose sales tax distribution. He asked for questions. There were none. Mr Mullins said there is a printout in the packet with a breakdown of what the budget consists of. He said the tank maintenance contract budget is $205,000 but the actual cost is $400,000 and can be spread out over 2 years. Mr. Mullins suggested not increasing water and sewer rates. He said inflation is not fully accounted for. Mr. Mullins said the enterprise fund will have $100,000 available for transfer. He said tonight he needs clear direction from the board. He said there are 2 recommended motions and he needs to know which to go with. Mr. Mullins said option 1 is to continue as presented. Commissioner Mortimer asked if this is based on a millage of 4.8754 which means we will be in the hole after next year. Mr. Mullins said yes, this is the result of kicking the proverbial can down the road. Commissioner Redding said that leaves a cushion of only $100,000 for the whole year. He said Chief Johnson just made half a million dollars in cuts along with cuts to the fire department budget. Commissioner Redding said we just had a presentation on revitalization that could generate revenue but we cannot afford it. He asked why eliminate the 5% water and sewer rate increase? Mr. Mullins said that's what he needs direction on. Commissioner Redding said I don't want my water bill to go up and I don't want my taxes to go up but this is a business and we only have $100,000 in reserves. He said we can't cut the 5% increase. Commissioner Redding said this has been crippling to the police department and the fire department. Commissioner Smith said you have the enterprise and the general and you are merging them back together again and we can't do that. He said we must keep one side separate and this side. Commissioner Smith said the chief just gave back half a million dollars and it has to stay on this side of the house. He said the enterprise fund has funded itself and has to make us money to move forward and reinvest in our utilities. Commissioner Smith said this proposal does not work for him. He said we need to talk about the fire department if we want to fund it to keep service from going down. He said the enterprise fund needs to be a standalone enterprise. Commissioner Smith said if not we need to be gone. Commissioner Smith said he hates increasing taxes and there are a few glitches in the system where people were not being charged the correct rates. He said it looks dire now but if we clear the air and get things under control we will probably be alright. Mayor Roberts said what you are saying is to not transfer and let the enterprise fund stand on its own. He said what you are saying is no transfer and he does not disagree with what you are saying but that is a big statement to all the services because we transfer $800,000 to $1,000,000. Commissioner Smith asked what we transferred this year. Clerk Crosby said $1,000,000. He said in the preliminary budget they had $500,000 that we were transferring over which was the goal they had been given. Clerk Crosby said since then a new $200,000 bill came in on the enterprise side that had not been figured in. That is the tank. He said the other is $200,000 they were going to raise to help fund police and fire. Clerk Crosby said that was going to be the rate increase on water and sewer but we needed that money to pay off the $500,000 note. He said that is $400,000 of it.

Clerk Crosby said here is what your choices are. You have to raise $400,000 in the enterprise fund so the rate increase would need to be 10% not 5%. Clerk Crosby said to have the money all you have to do is propose raising the water and sewer rates 10%. Commissioner Smith said he has talked the Mr. Mullins and the numbers are wrong because some of the customers have been charged wrong so we don't know what the true numbers are. Clerk Crosby said he can't balance the budget based on his assumption that some of the water rates are not right. Mayor Roberts said if we keep it separate it will be detrimental to the fire and police departments. He said we need to draw a line and say we are going to transfer $500,000. He said in the past they have transferred whatever was needed and that is what we are trying to get out of. Commissioner Smith said it would be a goal to not transfer. Mayor Roberts agreed. Clerk Crosby said we can transfer what you want but you have to raise rates. He said the $400,000 of the $5000,000 is not there unless you raise rates 10%. Mayor Roberts said let the enterprise fund take care of the enterprise fund. He said not transferring is a great goal but we can't get there overnight. Mr. Mullins said the general fund is coming up short and the general fund is going to have to raise the money. Commissioner Nugent said on rates you have to take into account new development generating revenue. Mr. Mullins said you can't take that into account. Sandcastle went from 25 to 22 homes. Clerk Crosby said Mr. Hughes and Mr. Farrell will make the numbers using standard accounting practices. Mayor Roberts said this growth is something we all want but the numbers can't be plugged in. We are budgeting for this year and next year but we can't today say in three years we are going to have growth. Mayor Roberts said we have to go with the clerk's numbers. Commissioner Mortimer said she thinks the manager is doing his job and giving the numbers the data reflects. This board needs to fish or cut bait. She said we have to do something not what we have been doing for how many years. Mr. Mullins said he and Clerk Crosby are not policy. That's the commission. Clerk Crosby said we count the beans. If you want to raise the mills you could have another $230,000. If you raise water and sewer rates that would be an additional $200,000. That's what you have to do to get to that number because of the additional $200,000 bill that came in. He said it's a math game. Commissioner Smith asked Chief Wise what $300,000 would do to keep services the way they are. Chief Wise said they would end up losing 3 employees. He said they would go from 12 to 9 firefighters. Commissioner Smith asked if Chief Wise could come up and talk. Chief Wise said a 9 man crew could cause some wait time. He said he could be the 4th when he's there. Chief Wise said you must look at more than just fires. He said there are cardiac arrests, extrications. Chief Wise said ya'll have to make tough decisions. He said we can't go with less than three until we can come back and get a fourth. Anything less than three you have taken away rescue operations. Commissioner Mortimer asked how the two in two out rule applies. Mr. Mullins said OSHA standards are waived when someone is in the fire or in the beginning stages of the fire then it is up to the incident commander. Commissioner Mortimer asked if a firefighter is prohibited from entering a structure when there is an actual fire. Mr. Mullins said it is up to the incident commander. Commissioner Mortimer asked about turnover in the fire department. Chief Wise said only retirements since he's been chief. Commissioner Mortimer asked about average pay with benefits. Chief Wise said $96,000. Mayor Roberts asked what is considered a firefighter under the code. Mr. Mullins said OHSA federal guidelines state they can adopt OSHA or their own definition of a firefighter. Mayor Roberts asked if a police officer could go into a fire with proper training. Mr. Mullins said yes. Commissioner Nugent asked if they would need training on running the equipment. Chief Wise said 180 hours of training is required to be a volunteer firefighter. That is what has happened to the volunteer fire department. Mr. Mullins said he and Chief Wise talked about having certified instructors and different avenues. Mayor Roberts asked Mr. Mullins if he is looking for clarification on the numbers. Mr. Mullins said yes. Commissioner Smith said on the enterprise side there is a lot of capital outlay. Maybe we could cut some costs by cutting projects while prices are high. Mr. Mullins said Commissioner Smith suggested $300,000 to the fire department and moving on from there. Clerk Crosby said raising water rates 5% will give $200,000 then you could transfer to the general fund and have $300,000 for the fire department. Mayor Roberts said the hard part is when do we stop transferring and underfunding other areas. He said we are in trouble and the numbers don't lie. Commissioner Smith said in a year we will know if we will have a police department or not. Commissioner Mortimer moved to accept the changes proposed by the City Manager and direct the Clerk's Office to prepare the balanced budget documents for a vote at the August 1st meeting. Mayor Roberts asked if she was saying option one. Commissioner Mortimer said yes. Commissioner Redding made a second for discussion. Commissioner Nugent asked what the millage rate is for option one. Commissioner Mortimer said 4.8754. Commissioner Nugent said we can raise it and it would help the police and fire. Mayor Roberts said that is not the motion. Commissioner Redding said he does not like any of this. He has spent 20 years with police and fire departments. Commissioner Redding does not want to cut from 4 on shift but we would still have our fire department intact. He said he never wanted to make any of these decisions but we have to do what's best for 6,000 people. Commissioner Smith said he can't see losing 2 fire department employees. Commissioner Nugent reiterated that a difference in millage could do something for the fire and police departments. Clerk Crosby asked if he was talking about 5.4935. Commissioner Nugent said yes sir. Mayor Roberts said we are staying at the same millage rate in that motion. The motion passed 4-1. Commissioner Smith opposed the motion. Clerk Crosby said we need motion for the tentative millage of 4.8754. Mayor Roberts entertained a motion. Commissioner Mortimer moved to set the millage at 4.8754. There was no second. Mayor Roberts passed the gavel and seconded the motion. The motion failed 2-3. Commissioner Nugent, Commissioner Redding and Commissioner Smith opposed the motion. Mayor Roberts entertained a motion for a millage rate. Commissioner Smith asked what would get us to $200,000 maybe 5.2. Commissioner Smith made a motion to set the millage at 5.4935. It was seconded by Commissioner Redding. The motion passed 3-2. Commissioner Mortimer and Mayor Roberts opposed the motion. Clerk Crosby said someone needs to make a motion to place that money somewhere or put it in reserves. Commissioner Mortimer made a motion to put it in reserves. There was no second. Mayor Roberts passed the gavel and made a second for discussion. Commissioner Nugent said we are trying to raise the millage to help out the fire and police departments. Vice-Mayor Smith entertained a motion to put the money in reserves. The motion failed 2-3. Commissioner Nugent, Commissioner Redding and Commissioner Smith opposed the motion. Mayor Roberts entertained a motion on where to put the money. Clerk Crosby said if nothing happens it will go in reserves and you can spend it later. Mayor Roberts said this is extremely hard but we have to do something. Commissioner Redding made a motion that the additional revenues from raising the millage be split between the fire and police departments. It was seconded by Commissioner Nugent. The motion passed 4-1. Commissioner Smith opposed the motion. Clerk Crosby said the September 7, 2023 special meeting will begin the budgetary process and the public can participate.

Mr. Mullins said westbound traffic opens on the overpass tomorrow. Chief Johnson said you can only go over the overpass after South Street.

Chief Johnson said a gentleman was arrested for evaluation with a high bond Chief Johnson said his guys did great when the man crossed the line and was put in the county jail.

Chief Johnson said he and Mr. Mullins recommend pulling up the stop signs on Pratt Street and maybe putting in speed bumps. Commissioner Nugent suggested rumble strips on Colley Road.

Attorney Martin had nothing to report.

Commissioner Nugent thanked everyone for a good meeting and moving forward.

Commissioner Mortimer had nothing further.

Commissioner Redding had nothing further.

Commissioner Smith had nothing further.

Mayor Roberts thanked Commissioner Nugent for bringing up keeping the memorial downtown. Mayor Roberts suggested forming a committee. Commissioner Nugent said the American Legion is in the process of relandscaping around the cannon. Commissioner Redding said the important thing is a safe place for all veterans. Commissioner Nugent said other monuments need to be placed there.

There being no further business the meeting was adjourned at 8:13 pm.