



Minutes
City Council Work Session
December 5th, 2023
6:30pm

Baldwin Municipal Courtroom, 155 Willingham Avenue, Baldwin, GA 30511

Mayor Stephanie Almagno, Council Member Erik Keith, Council Member Theron Ayers, Council Member Maarten Venter, and Council Member Alice Venter were all in attendance.

Call Meeting to Order

Mayor Stephanie Almagno called the meeting to order at 6:31 pm.

Assistant Chief Justin Ferguson introduced newest Baldwin Police Officer Aaron Spivey, who will work as a shift supervisor opposite John Taylor starting in January.

Economic Development Discussion (max. 20 minutes)

Mayor Almagno opened the discussion by welcoming 365 Superstore, which opened for business this week on Highway 365 and Charlie Davis Road.

Council Member Alice Venter stated that she had spoken with a Habersham County Commissioner after they attended a economic development/rezoning seminar through CVIOG. Venter said that with the growth coming to the county, it's important for the County to listen to the cities' needs and expectations. Venter added that The Habersham County Community Collaboration Cooperation (HC3) meetings would be a great opportunity for newly elected officials to be brought up to speed and to encourage an attitude of community and teamwork.

Mayor Almagno asked CAO Emily Woodmaster to discuss the R-cuts of Highway 365, an effort by GDOT and County representatives to mitigate the increasing accidents that have happened on the highway. The R-cuts, the majority of which are in Baldwin, do not address the problem of speeding, and while Baldwin Police and Fire are handling the crashes, their input was not asked for when the County and State were making these decisions. Fire Chief Joe Roy has established that Baldwin fire trucks do not fit in the R-cuts, which will drastically increase response times. Another concern is that businesses already on the highway will see a decrease in customers as it will be more difficult to access them.

Woodmaster stated that the DOT hopes to limit the number of potential impact points with the R-cuts, which were pre-designed and already had funds allocated. Almagno stated that there will be unintended consequences of the decisions made and that they will not improve the safety of the highway. She said that she wants to work with citizens, especially those of Highland Pointe, to ensure their voices are heard.

Council Member Maarten Venter briefly left the room and returned at 6:52 pm.

Council Member Alice Venter suggested calling a new meeting with Habersham County Sheriff Joey Terrell, Representative Victor Anderson, Senator Bo Hatchett, and the DOT to come to Baldwin and answer questions from both the City and citizens regarding the highway changes and what can be done to address the problem of people driving too fast.

Public Hearing

Old Business

New Business

1. Policy for Revocation of Cemetery Plots

Woodmaster explained that a citizen had recently approached City Hall about returning cemetery plots that they no longer need. The Cemetery Rules and Regulations, which were approved earlier this year, do not contemplate someone wanting to return a vacant cemetery plot to the City. This request is to add a policy to give people the ability to return a vacant lot.

Woodmaster offered two recommendations for plot revocation. First, create the ability for someone to revoke their payment plan, waive any rights in the ownership of the plot, and be reimbursed by the City for the money paid after providing proof of payments made. The owner will also sign a waiver stating that they will not have access to the payment plan option for plot purchases in the future. With Council approval, reimbursement through the City could be writing a check for the amount paid, moving partial payments to another plot's payment plan balance, or applying the amount paid to a water bill. Woodmaster did not recommend the third option for reimbursement as the cemetery is part of the general fund and water bills are part of the enterprise fund.

The second recommendation is for cemetery plots that have been paid for in full and are owned by the purchaser. If a family has purchased a lot in full but has no use for it, they may sell the vacant lot back to the City, who will write a check to the owner after they provide proof of ownership and payment(s) made.

Council was in consensus in bringing this forward at Monday night's meeting.

2. Mayor's Reading Club

Mayor Almagno summarized the Mayor's Reading Club, which is a GMA initiative to help literacy rates in local children. A proclamation would be made that the Mayor and City of Baldwin would participate, then Baldwin would design events to read books to children, get children excited about reading, etc. One idea discussed between Almagno and City Clerk Erin Gathercoal was to build a "little library" at the Baldwin Farmers' Market, which is a central location and easily accessible. Almagno stated she would also like to also focus on bilingual books and reading events.

Council was in consensus to bring this forward at Monday night's meeting.

3. City of Civility and Ethics (Mayor Almagno requested items #3 and #4 be discussed together)

GMA offers official pledges of civility and ethics, or how municipalities interact with their citizens and other cities. Mayor Almagno stated that Baldwin already models both principles, but these pledges would help give Baldwin some recognition at the state level and it would be good to have a conscious reminder of these practices. Becoming a City of Civility requires the passing of a resolution and becoming a City of Ethics requires the passing of an ordinance.

Both Council Members Maarten Venter and Erik Keith stated that the City already demonstrates civility and good ethics, and to codify such practices is unnecessary.

Legal counsel Jack Samuels offered clarification on the City of Ethics certification. Title 45 of O.C.G.A. sets basic minimum standards for the conduct of government officials, however, there is no enforcement mechanism. The state leaves it up to and how these standards are enforced up to the local governments. In order to become a City of Ethics, GMA requires the City pass a resolution and institute an ordinance that meets their minimum standards of conduct and provides due process to each city's people. Samuels stated that it could be an undertaking for the City to create an ethics board, but it could be eased by selecting a panel of potential people to serve on an ethics board, and those people are called upon in the rare situation that requires an ethics board. This is implementing enforcement for a state law that already exists (the basic standards). Not everyone pursues creating the enforcement mechanism, but ultimately it would be a policy decision that Council must make.

Council was in consensus to table these items for a future meeting.

Council Member Alice Venter stated that a citizen had commented on the live feed of the council meeting with the following question: "With the state now registering Multipurpose off-road vehicles for use on county road, Will the city adopt a resolution to allow the newly tagged utility vehicles on city streets?"

Mayor Almagno thanked the citizen for their question and stated that the appropriate City staff would find more information and an answer for them.


Announcement

- a. City Offices will be closed on December 22nd and December 25th in observance of the Christmas holiday and January 1st in observance of New Year's Day.
- b. City Hall will be operating by drive-through and appointment only from Tuesday, December 26th through Friday, December 29th. To make an appointment with a member of City Hall staff, please call 706-778-6341.

- c. Woodmaster announced that the City of Baldwin Fire Department has a light show coordinated with music at the fire station. Residents can tune into 100.7 FM from 6:00 pm to 9:00 pm to watch, but please do not block the bay doors.
- d. Stephanie Almagno thanked the Baldwin Elementary Choir for their performance at the Tree Lighting, Marelene's Cakes for their donation of cookies, and Baldwin staff for making the event possible.

Adjournment

Action: A motion was made by Theron Ayers to adjourn the meeting with a second by Maarten Venter. Motion Carried 4-0 at 7:40 pm.



Stephanie Almagno, Mayor

12/11/2023

Date Approved by Council



Erin Gathercoal, City Clerk

