M I N U T E S

City Council Meeting
Monday, July 20, 2026 – 6:00 p.m.

Call to Order: Mayor Campbell called the meeting to order at approximately 6:00 p.m.

Opening: Mayor Campbell gave the invocation and led the City Council in the Pledge of Allegiance.

Roll Call
City Council Members: Mayor Bruce Campbell, Mayor Pro Tem Gwyn Hall, President of Council Natalyn Morris, Councilmember Bruner, Councilmember Figiel, and Councilmember Richard Lassiter. Absent: Councilmember Debbie Ruiz (medical).

Staff Members: Rhonda Ferrell-Bowles, City Manager; James P. Gerard, City Attorney; Gil Ballard, Police Chief; Mike Dick, Fire Chief; Cliff Ducey, Parks and Recreation Director; Mack Roberts, Fire Marshal; Veronica Enoch, Governmental Affairs & Strategic Initiatives Director; Katie Draeger, Finance Director; Carlos Nevarez, Planning Director; and Tonya Roper, Clerk of Council; and Kyle Thomas, IT Tech.

Informal Public Comment: Mayor Campbell opened the floor for the informal public comment section. Mayor Campbell announced the informal public comment section is for all topics except for items on the agenda as a public hearing. There is a separate public hearing for property taxes. The informal public comment section is not to speak regarding property taxes.

Linda Traywick, 207 Main Street, stated that when the Mayor took office, his salary was $800 per month and was increased in 2024 to $15,600 per month. She said that this raise applied only to the Mayor, although Council salaries also increased. Ms. Traywick said her concern is that the Council is now considering another salary increase.

Ms. Traywick said the City's vision of continuous improvement in quality of life, which she believes is not being met at the current level. She further stated that, based on her observations, the Mayor averages one to two hours of work every two weeks, amounting to approximately $325 in value. She added that residents are now facing higher taxes, which many cannot afford.

Mayor Campbell stated that this portion of the meeting is for comments on matters other than taxes. He said that a separate public hearing on taxes is scheduled and that this is not the appropriate time for tax-related comments.

Given no additional comments, Mayor Campbell closed this section for informal public comment.

Public Hearings:
Millage Rate: Receipt of public comment for Mayor and Council to tentatively set the ad valorem tax rate of Garden City for the fiscal year 2026.

Linda Traywick, 207 Main Street, stated that the Mayor is paid approximately $325 per meeting and is proposing a property tax increase. She said she cannot afford an 88 percent tax increase and believes most residents in attendance cannot afford it either.

The City Attorney stated that no resolution, motion, or documentation exists regarding any proposal to increase the salaries of the Mayor or Council.

Ms. Traywick responded that she found information online.

The City Attorney clarified that the information is incorrect and has been misunderstood, and there has been no effort to raise the salary of any Council member.

Amy Blechman, 73 Lynn Avenue, stated that after reviewing the slide deck online, she still had many questions, saying that the information was vague. Ms. Blechman said she is requesting a reconciliation showing the City's total recurring revenues by source for fiscal years 2025 and 2026—including property taxes, fire fees, sales taxes, franchise fees, business taxes, licensing, permits, charges for service, and transfers—and asked how much new recurring revenue is expected under the proposed budget compared to last year.

The Finance Director asked whether Ms. Blechman had reviewed the PowerPoint presentation.

Ms. Blechman responded that she had but found it vague.

The Finance Director stated that the presentation includes the 2025 and 2026 budget numbers.

Ms. Blechman replied that it does not provide a bottom-line comparison and said there is a nearly $4.9 million difference related to fire fee costs that is not clearly explained. She asked whether the difference falls solely on property owners and how much is attributed to business taxes and sales taxes.

The Finance Director stated that the 2026 budget includes only $3 million in property tax revenue and that the budget has not yet been updated to reflect any property tax rate changes because none have been approved.

Ms. Blechman stated that there is no clear line-by-line comparison.

The Finance Director replied that the full 2026 budget is available online.

Ms. Blechman concluded by stating she had reviewed both the 2025 and 2026 budgets.

Councilmember Hall stated that both budgets are online as part of open records, Councilmember Hall said that all revenues and expenses are publicly accessible and that the City is not attempting to hide any information.

Mr. Shagari Williams, 59 Varnedoe Avenue, asked whether any portion of the City's surplus could be allocated to reduce the proposed 88% millage rate increase.

The City Manager stated that the City does allocate some surplus funds each year through an appropriation of fund balance, which is used to support annual budget needs.

Mr. Williams referenced the auditor's mention of a $16 million surplus and asked for clarification.

The City Manager explained that the auditor was referring to the level of reserves expressed in days or months of operating funds available in the event of an emergency; the City maintains a surplus and appropriates from it as needed. The City Manager stated that the City's budget, including the appropriation of fund balance, is available for public review online.

The City Manager further stated that for FY 2025, the City appropriated $3.7 million from the surplus to balance the budget, and the proposed FY 2026 budget appropriates approximately $3.9 million. With the fire department transitioning from the enterprise fund into the general fund, which currently consists of thirteen departments - the City will need to appropriate over $5 million from the surplus. The City Manager said that continued reliance on surplus funds will deplete reserves over time, similar to drawing repeatedly from personal savings.

Mr. Williams reiterated that he understood the concern about depleting savings but asked whether additional surplus funds could be used specifically to reduce the 88% millage rate increase.

The City Manager responded that surplus funds will be used to reduce the impact of the millage rate increase; however, the full amount cannot be offset by surplus alone. The City Manager stated that the fire department represents approximately $5 million in expenditures, requiring increased revenues once fully incorporated into the general fund.

Mr. Williams concluded by thanking the City Manager for the response, stating that he did not feel he received a clear answer to his question.

Councilmember Bruner asked how much funding would need to be appropriated under the proposed 7.581 millage rate compared to the initial 3.5 mill rate.

The City Manager stated that at the estimated 7.581 mills, the City would still need to appropriate approximately $700,000 to $1 million. At 6 mills, the appropriation would be about $2.2 million, and at 5.5 mills, about $2.7 million.

Councilmember Bruner stated that the 2025 budget had been adopted with an appropriation of $3.538 million.

The City Manager confirmed this, adding that the appropriation would be reduced significantly depending on the millage rate adopted.

The Finance Director stated the appropriation increased by $1.7 million, bringing the current total to $5.3 million.

Councilmember Bruner stated that the 7.581 millage rate would reduce the appropriation to approximately $700,000.

The City Manager replied yes.

Miles Girardeau, 76 Lynn Avenue, stated that he values his neighborhood and believes it is one of the best in Garden City; however, he noted that residents often have to leave the city to shop, unlike years ago when multiple stores were available.

Mr. Girardeau expressed concern about the proposed 88 percent tax increase, stating that rising assessment values already result in higher county property taxes. He said his bill increased this month and is unsure how much more it will rise with the proposed rate. Mr. Girardeau stated that the increase feels excessive but acknowledged the City's effort to support fire services.

Al Ellisor, 5228 Augusta Road, asked whether taxes have been increasing gradually for all residents. He stated the fire fee was implemented around 2009 and, following the recent court decision, a portion of the collected fees will be refunded, with residents receiving about 20 percent of what they paid. Mr. Ellisor asked what portion of the cost Garden City is responsible for and urged the City to exhaust all internal financial options before shifting costs to citizens. He stated that financial responsibility is needed and suggested cutting nonessential expenses, citing the library near City Hall as an example if the City has any financial obligation to it.

Mr. Ellisor concluded by stating that Council represents all citizens and should listen to their concerns. He requested that, if necessary, the decision be delayed again, as the proposed increase will not be well-received by taxpayers.

The City Attorney stated that when Council adopted the fire fee in 2011, it was legal and had been upheld by Georgia courts. Over time, however, court decisions shifted, and more recent rulings found that fire fees structured in this manner were improper. The City Attorney said that this change resulted from evolving legal interpretations, not from any mistake by the City.

The City Attorney explained that no court ordered the City to pay refunds; rather, the City settled the case because it anticipated that a court might rule the fee invalid. The original claim was approximately $5.2 million, and the City negotiated the amount down to $1.4 million, which Council determined was the most prudent option.

The City Attorney stated that courts have since concluded that fire protection fees should be included in ad valorem taxes rather than collected separately as a use tax. He said that fire fees were originally implemented because jurisdictions believed users of the fire service should bear more of the cost. Courts have now determined that such fees must be incorporated into property taxes, and most cities are facing similar adjustments due to these legal changes.

Don Bethune, 2621 Woodlawn Avenue, addressed Councilmember Bruner regarding prior comments made during a recent workshop. Mr. Bethune stated that Councilmember Bruner referenced promises made during annexation 28 years ago, including water and sewer service, no property taxes, and additional services. Mr. Bethune stated that for 15 years no property taxes were paid and questioned the suggestion that the area does not receive better services.

Mr. Bethune stated that Councilmember Bruner currently pays $44 per year in Garden City taxes. He said that under a 7.5 millage rate, if the residence were instead in the County, the homeowner would pay county taxes, an $85 dry trash fee, a 6.5 mill county rate, and would lose the $40,000 Garden City homestead exemption. Mr. Bethune said county services would consist of police protection, right-of-way maintenance, and fire department service. He concluded by stating he disagrees with the view that paying $44 in city taxes provides no benefit.

Mr. Bethune next addressed Councilmember Figiel. He stated that in September, Councilmember Figiel presented at the Senior Center his business experience and background in managing large budgets. Mr. Bethune stated that Mr. Figiel said he had a copy of the 2025 budget and plans to review it in detail over the next two weeks to identify what he believes are wasteful expenditures. He asked Councilmember Figiel if he could identify any items in the budget that could be cut.

Councilmember Bruner responded that while the homestead information referenced may be accurate, he owns multiple properties in Garden City and pays several fees. He stated that he pays more to Garden City than referenced by Mr. Bethune, noting stormwater fees exceeding $300 per month, fire fees over $200 per month before they were discontinued, and property taxes on multiple properties that total significantly more than $46 per year.

Councilmember Figiel stated that his voting record is public and reflects his commitment to opposing wasteful spending. Councilmember Figiel said that he voted against several items—approximately four or five—that he felt were not needed.

With no additional comments, Mayor Campbell closed the public hearing.

SUB-26-0002 – Village Point Townhomes Final Subdivision Plat Map (Constantine Road): Receipt of public comment on a request by Simcoe At Mosswood, LLC applicant, seeking for approval of the final map for townhomes located at 0 Constantine Road.

Travis Bazemore, EMC Engineering, stated he was present on behalf of the applicant and available to answer any questions.

The Planning Director stated that this item is for public comment on the final plat. The preliminary subdivision plat was approved in 2022 for the development of 76 townhomes behind City Hall. He stated that nothing has changed since the initial approval, all required infrastructure has been installed, and the developer has constructed the extension of Constantine Road, which the City will assume after final inspections. All required bonds and warranties, including a 30-month warranty period, have been submitted. City staff reported no concerns and recommended approval.

Mayor Campbell opened the floor to those wishing to speak for or against the request. Given no comments, Mayor Campbell closed the public hearing.

GDP-26-0002 – General Development Plan (129 St. Joseph's Avenue): Receipt of public comment on a request by Ashley Mosley, as authorized agent for Jonathan Austin seeking approval for construction of a 6000 sq. ft. metal building, partitioned into four 1,500 sq. ft. units for 129 St. Joseph's Avenue.

The Planning Director stated that the Planning Commission reviewed the request and recommended denial due to traffic concerns, existing conditions on St. Joseph's Avenue, and the proposed commercial use within a residential area. He said that City staff recommends approval because the proposal meets all zoning requirements, including permitted use, buffers, and relevant zoning regulations.

The Planning Director stated that staff understand public concerns regarding commercial activity adjoining a residential neighborhood. The Planning Director finished by saying the petitioner and property owner are here to speak on behalf of application, along with any individuals wishing to comment on the request.

Mayor Campbell opened the floor to those wishing to speak for or against the request.

Austin Page, 129 St. Joseph Avenue, stated he purchased the property with the intention of operating his business there and creating three additional units. Mr. Page said he paid a higher price because the property is zoned heavy commercial and believed commercial development was appropriate. He said the lot is located behind Family Dollar and near Enmarket, with existing truck traffic and litter issues.

Mr. Page stated he intends to improve the site and emphasized that residential construction is not permitted under current zoning. He said other commercial buildings in the area are located on smaller lots and close to residences. Mr. Page stated his proposed development would not be situated near homes. Mr. Page asked for clarification on what development options are allowed for the property.

Councilmember Lassiter asked how ingress and egress would function for public safety, specifically how emergency access would be maintained without disrupting normal traffic flow in the area.

Mr. Page responded that each proposed unit is approximately 1,500 square feet and would generate minimal traffic. He stated his business has four employees and that he would be on-site only two to three days per week, using the space primarily for equipment storage. He said he does not anticipate significant vehicle activity at the property.

Mr. Page stated he intends to reduce the project to four units. He said that each unit is small at approximately 1,500 square feet and would likely generate limited activity. Mr. Page stated that he anticipates that future occupants would use the spaces similarly to his intended use for storage, resulting in minimal traffic.

Councilmember Morris asked whether there is any guarantee regarding the types of uses or tenants that might occupy the proposed units.

Mr. Page replied that there is no guarantee regarding future tenants or uses but stated the units are small—about 1,500 square feet—and would most likely be used as small offices or storage, similar to his intended use.

Councilmember Hall asked what materials Mr. Page would store in the units.

Mr. Page replied that he owns an elevator business and would store elevator equipment.

The City Attorney asked Mr. Page whether he had obtained title to the city lane included in his development plan.

Mr. Page replied that he had not.

The City Attorney stated that the applicant would need to petition the City to abandon the existing city lane before any development could occur on it. He explained that, under Georgia law, the City must formally abandon the lane before it can be sold to the applicant, and a site plan cannot be approved if it encroaches on an active city lane. The City Attorney said that the current site plan shows the project crossing the lane.

Mr. Page confirmed this and stated he had previously discussed the matter with the Planning Director.

An engineer for the applicant stated he was available to answer technical questions. He expressed support for the project and said that flex-space units benefit the local economy by providing smaller spaces for small businesses. He stated that several concerns raised by the Planning Commission related to engineering issues that would be addressed during the design process. He restated his support and offered to respond to any further questions.

The City Attorney stated he was unsure that the City could approve a development that encroaches on its right-of-way. He said that encroachments generally require formal abandonment by the City before approval.

The applicant’s engineer stated that similar encroachments occur frequently in Savannah, where cities often abandon lanes and sell them to the adjoining property owner. He said this is a common process and suggested the same approach would apply in this case.

The City Attorney suggested that the matter be tabled until the issue involving the city lane is resolved, rather than proceeding with denial of the site plan.

Julius Bryant, 115 St. Joseph Avenue, stated he is opposed to the proposed commercial development. Mr. Bryant said that St. Joseph Avenue is a one-way street with one way in and out, and additional commercial activity would worsen existing traffic conditions. Mr. Bryant said that placing another home would be better. He finished by stating that all residents on the street are opposed to the project and that a business is not appropriate for the location.

Angela Vaughn, 116 St. Joseph Avenue, stated she is opposed to the proposed development. Ms. Vaughn said she agreed with previous comments that the project would increase congestion and foot and vehicle traffic, and said she does not support the addition of a commercial use on the street.

The City Attorney stated that the property is zoned heavy commercial, and the applicant purchased it with the expectation of using it for commercial purposes. He added that the City's comprehensive future land-use plan also designates the parcel for commercial use. The City Attorney clarified that commercial activity is legally permitted on the site; issues such as buffers, setbacks, and the intensity of use would be addressed through the site-plan process in coordination with Council.

Shagari Williams, 59 Varnedoe Avenue, stated he is opposed to the proposed development. Mr. Williams questioned why the area is zoned heavy commercial rather than residential, saying that if he were a resident on this street, he would not want additional noise or increased traffic. He also said aren't there concerns about flooding on the street during heavy rain.

Mr. Williams asked how the proposed business—and other warehouses being built in Garden City—would contribute toward offsetting the proposed 88 percent tax increase. He finished by stating he does not support the project.

Tracy Campbell, 119 St. Joseph Avenue, stated she is opposed to the proposed development. She said there is already one commercial property at the end of the street that generates significant traffic, and additional commercial activity—combined with existing traffic from Enmarket and Family Dollar—would further increase congestion. Ms. Campbell stated she does not support the project.

Tammy Allen stated her parents reside at 115 St. Joseph Avenue and that she grew up at the property. She said the area was rezoned to commercial in 1959 without residents being informed or given a voice. Ms. Allen said that when a warehouse was later constructed, residents again were not informed and also not properly notified of this meeting, arriving at the stated time only to find it had already adjourned.

Ms. Allen asked the Council to carefully consider residents' concerns regarding the proposed commercial development or potential rezoning. Ms. Allen emphasized that the street is one-way and already experiences heavy traffic from the nearby warehouse, Enmarket, and Family Dollar, including 18-wheelers. She also said that trucks frequently turn onto the street thinking it connects through to another roadway, and that signage may be inadequate. Ms. Allen asked the Council to take all these factors into account when making their decision.

With no further comments, Mayor Campbell closed the public hearing.

City Council Minutes: Councilmember Hall made a motion to approve the minutes of the July 6th Pre-Agenda Session and City Council meeting minutes and July 13th Workshop meeting minutes. The motion was seconded by Councilmember Morris and passed with Councilmember Bruner, Councilmember Figiel, Councilmember Hall, Councilmember Morris and Mayor Campbell voting in favor of the motion. Councilmember Lassiter abstained due to absence.

Items for Consideration:
Resolution – Millage Rate: The Clerk of Council read the heading of a resolution of the Mayor and Council of Garden City, Georgia adopting the ad valorem tax millage rate for the 2026 Fiscal Year, and for other purposes.

Councilmember Bruner stated prior to voting he has significant concerns regarding the proposed millage rate. He said that he reviewed the budget thoroughly and met with the City Manager to understand how the additional revenue would be allocated. He stated that the City has relied on appropriated fund balances for several years, including $3.538 million in the prior year and $3.312 million the year before, based on assumptions that revenues were underestimated and expenditures were overestimated and should make up for the appropriation of funds.

Councilmember Bruner stated that the proposed millage rate was initially described as necessary to offset the $1.46 million loss of fire fee revenue, but that such a loss would not require an increase as large as the 7.581 mills being proposed. He stated that he questioned why nearly $5 million in additional projected revenue—approximately $4.5 million above the 2025 budget assumptions—is needed, and it came down to that most of it appears intended to cover prior-year appropriations, reducing the remaining deficit to about $700,000.

Councilmember Bruner asked why appropriations that were acceptable in previous budgets now must be fully covered and suggested considering a lower millage rate. He said that at 5.5 mills, the appropriation would be reduced to an estimated $2.7 million—almost $1 million less than what had been approved in earlier years. Councilmember Bruner questioned the necessity of adopting the full 7.581 mill rate.

The City Manager stated that a millage rate of 5.5 mills would reduce the appropriation to an estimated $2.7 million.

Councilmember Bruner suggested if there would be a consideration of possibly going to a lower increase on the millage rate versus going to a 7.581 millage rate.

Mayor Campbell replied a motion will be entertained and each member will vote as they see fit.

Councilmember Hall responded that Council initially discussed an 8-mill rate before reducing the proposal to 7.581 mills. He shared an example from one of his own properties, stating that he currently pays $23.95 in taxes on an undeveloped lot without a homestead exemption, plus $78 annually in fire fees which is $6.50 per month; a total of $101.95 annually. Under the proposed millage rate, his total tax would be approximately $72.26 per year, which would be a savings of $30 annually in that instance. Councilmember Hall stated that many residents—particularly seniors with homestead exemptions—would experience similar outcomes, though others may not.

Councilmember Hall emphasized that higher-value homes and businesses would bear a larger share of the cost. He said that citizens expect services such as fire protection, police, stormwater drainage, water and sewer, and recreation, and the City must continue providing them. Councilmember Hall cautioned that using reserve funds would harm the City's bond rating, losing the opportunity for lower rates and reduce its ability to obtain affordable financing. He finished by saying that although the decision is difficult, it is necessary to maintain essential services.

Councilmember Morris stated that, before the vote, she also wished to comment. She said that Councilmembers are elected to represent residents and that they understand the community's concerns regarding the proposed tax increase. She stated that she is also a Garden City resident and pays taxes, and that exemptions—such as homestead, school-tax, and disability exemptions—can help offset costs for eligible taxpayers.

Councilmember Morris stated that the City must continue providing essential services, including police, fire, stormwater, water and sewer, and recreation. With the elimination of the fire fee and rising costs for staffing, benefits, equipment, and operations, she said the City must consider cost-of-living factors similar to those affecting households.

Councilmember Morris explained that while budget reductions were reviewed early in the process, discontinuing core services is not feasible. She said that although the tax increase will impact some residents, the decision is necessary to ensure the City's ability to maintain services, support growth, attract new businesses, and remain a desirable place to live, work, and play. The City cannot guarantee it but we are looking into bringing back grocery stores and more restaurants. She finished by saying that the decision is difficult but made with the City's long-term interests in mind.

Councilmember Lassiter stated that the decision before Council is difficult and that he has been concerned since the prior week because many citizens—including seniors and others with health challenges—will be affected by the increase. Councilmember Lassiter said that costs are rising everywhere and that the City cannot improve or grow while maintaining previous substandard funding levels. He stated that neighboring communities such as Pooler and Port Wentworth have grown for years while Garden City has repeatedly rolled back taxes, leaving the City behind.

Councilmember Lassiter stated that the City must catch up and manage its finances responsibly to maintain essential services. He said that relying on reserve funds would quickly deplete the City's savings and jeopardize its financial stability. Councilmember Lassiter concluded by saying that increasing the millage rate is necessary to maintain operations and support Garden City's long-term viability.

With no further comments, Mayor Campbell called for a motion.

Councilmember Lassiter made a motion to approve the resolution. Councilmember Morris seconded the motion; the motion passes with Councilmember Hall, Councilmember Lassiter, Councilmember Morris, and Mayor Campbell voting in favor of the motion. Councilmember Bruner and Councilmember Figiel voted in opposition.

Resolution – Village Point Townhomes Final Subdivision Map (Constantine Road): The Clerk of Council read the heading of a resolution of the Mayor and Council approving the final subdivision map for the subdivision of a 17.69-acre tract located at 0 Constantine Road into seventy-six (76) proposed townhome lots owned by Simcoe At Mosswood, LLC.

Councilmember Morris made a motion to approve the resolution. Councilmember Lassiter seconded the motion. The motion passes with all voting in favor of the motion.

Resolution – General Development Plan (129 St. Joseph's Avenue): The Clerk of Council read the heading a resolution by the Mayor and Council approving the general development plan application of Ashley Mosley as authorized agent for Jonathan Austin for the construction of a 6000 sq. ft. metal building, partitioned into four 1,500 sq. ft. units to be used and/or leased for heavy commercial use on a project site measuring 0.42 acres at 129 St. Joseph's Avenue in Garden City, Georgia,

Councilmember Lassiter made a motion to continue for further research. Councilmember Hall seconded the motion. Mayor Campbell announced that the motion made and seconded will table the request until further notice. The motion passes with all voting in favor of the motion.

Adjournment: Councilmember Lassiter made a motion to adjourn at approximately 6:55pm. The motion was seconded by Councilmember Morris and passed without opposition.

Transcribed & submitted by: The Clerk of Council
Accepted & approved by: The City Council on 8-17-26