

MINUTES
REGULAR MEETING OF THE VALDOSTA CITY COUNCIL
5:30 P.M., THURSDAY, JULY 23, 2020
COUNCIL CHAMBERS, CITY HALL

OPENING CEREMONIES

Mayor Scott James Matheson called the regular meeting of the Valdosta City Council to order at 5:30 p.m. Council members present were: Joseph “Sonny” Vickers, Tim Carroll, Ben Norton, Sandra Tooley, Eric Howard, Andy Gibbs, and Vivian Miller-Cody. The invocation was given by Councilman Ben Norton, followed by the Pledge of Allegiance to the American Flag.

AWARDS AND PRESENTATIONS

Special Presentation of the 2020 Valdosta Historic Preservation Awards.

James Horton, Special Projects Coordinator/Historic Preservation Planner, stated that May of each year is National Historic Preservation Month and this year’s theme is “This Place Matters,” a campaign for showcasing one’s favorite historic building. The City of Valdosta is celebrating the 12th Annual Historic Preservation Awards which are presented to a select few who have gone above and beyond to rehabilitate and preserve a particular contributing historic building or construct a new building which blends well with the historic character of the District. The categories for the awards are: (1) Outstanding Achievement for large rehabilitation projects, (2) Distinguished Merit for smaller rehabilitation projects, (3) Stewardship for long term preservation and care of a historic building, and (4) Harold M. Bennett Lifetime Achievement Award for a Valdostan who has preserved buildings or promoted the Historic Preservation Movement in Valdosta in an outstanding way over a long period of time. These Awards provide positive reinforcement to the Historic District Design Review process, promote goodwill within our community, and acknowledge the hard work and monetary re-investment back into the community’s building stock. Mayor Scott James Matheson and Dr. Alex Alvarez, Chairman of the Valdosta Historic Preservation Commission, assisted with presentation of the Awards and James Horton reviewed the Projects and announced the winners in each category.

In the Outstanding Achievement Award category, the Bird Hospital Building, which is located at 128 North Oak Street and currently owned by the Lowndes County Historical Society, was constructed in 1927 by Dr. and Mrs. Frank Bird. It is one of the early hospitals in Valdosta and set the stage for the development of Pineview General Hospital which was later converted to South Georgia Medical Center. This Hospital was operated by Dr. Bird as the main Hospital in Valdosta for a number of years until his death after an accident at the Hospital. After the Bird Hospital closed, it was used for a variety of uses and was later purchased by the First Baptist Church for use as a Youth Building. In 2015, the First Baptist Church sold it to the Lowndes County Historical Society, and they planned to rehabilitate the building for use as a museum exhibit area, offices, a meeting room, and storage for the museum’s collection. In November of 2017, the Lowndes County Historical Society began renovations and completed the work in January of 2020. The building was re-roofed, exterior wood repaired, and specialty painted to restore its original red brick appearance. On the interior, the entire building was renovated including new plumbing, wiring, wall and floor coverings, and a new elevator. The building also received new air conditioning and heating. J. Glenn Gregory and Associates was the Architect for the Project which amounted to a \$900,000 re-investment in the Local Historic District.

In the Distinguished Merit Award category, Dr. Alex Alvarez has been rehabilitating homes in the Local Historic District for a number of years now. He is working on a Project termed the Brookwood North Craftsman and American Small House Project which is a preservation effort to purchase historic rental homes, rehabilitate them, and subsequently sell them to families that will become owner/occupants. Included in the current nomination are four homes: (1) 209 East Cranford Avenue, (2) 212 East Cranford Avenue, (3) 305 East Jane Street, and (4) 1516 Williams Street. After Dr. Alvarez purchased these homes, he upgraded the exterior with new finishes and added landscaping. The home at 1516 Williams Street received extensive renovation including the re-working of the original pressed metal roof, a new master bedroom addition, and a full interior remodel doubling the value of the home. Two of the homes included in the Project have already been purchased by owner/occupants and several past Projects in the District have resulted in new homeowners coming to live there. The hope is to help stabilize the Brookwood North District as a homeowner occupied historic neighborhood.

In the Stewardship Award category, the First Antioch Missionary Baptist Church was nominated in the Stewardship category for maintaining a beautiful historic building in its original design for over 100 years. The First Antioch Missionary Baptist Church, one of Valdosta's oldest religious congregations, occupies a historic edifice erected c. 1916-1919 at 517 North Oak Street. For over a century now, the congregation has maintained this anchor of its neighborhood in admirable condition, with few changes and great respect for the integrity of its fabric. Not only has the purpose of the building remained unchanged, but both its exterior and interior have been preserved to a high degree of its original design and building materials. It is presumed that famed local architect Lloyd Greer designed this beautiful building with its square flanking towers and arched openings reminiscent of the Romanesque Revival. It also features touches of Colonial Revival design that was in vogue at the time of its construction. The brick pattern of this building is a striking Flemish Bond design that employs red and black bricks which can be attributed to Samuel Forrest (1874-1945), a master bricklayer and son of First Antioch's founding pastor, the Reverend Elbert Forrest (1837-1922). The geometric pattern of the stain glass windows of blue and gold illuminate the interior which also features a remarkable luminaire, c. 1899 that originally hung in the First Baptist Church but was transferred to First Antioch c. 1950. The First Antioch Missionary Baptist Church congregation is to be commended for work in sustaining the building and for their ongoing diligence in assuring the preservation of its beautiful, historically significant, and irreplaceable sanctuary.

Also, in the Stewardship Award category, a second Award was presented to the First Baptist Church for preserving and maintaining a beautiful campus for over 120 years. The First Baptist Church of Valdosta boasts a beautiful sanctuary constructed in 1900, the Sunday School Annex was added in 1926, and the Children's Building and Langdale Chapel were both added in 1956. The current Children's Building was added in 2006 and the old Children's Building was renovated into an Adult Education space in 2007. In January of 2016, the new Family Life Center was added to the campus as a facility for youth and a large fellowship hall which is used for early contemporary services, concerts, banquets, church family meals, and much more. In addition to continuous maintenance on all of the buildings and grounds, a recent renovation to the Langdale Chapel was completed. J. Glenn Gregory served as the Architect for the rehabilitation and Marguerite Harrell was the interior decorator. The stain glass windows were preserved and repaired and a new one was added behind the pulpit. A new lighting/sound system was added, and the pews were refinished. They also replaced paneling and carpet and extended the platform all to make this facility refreshed and up-to-date to continue in service to the Church and community. A number of years ago, the First Baptist Church undertook a major Project with the replacement of the original pressed metal roof. The new roof is pressed metal and is reminiscent of the design of the original and represents a generous investment in the preservation and beauty of the building. Another recent Project was the restoration of the original wooden entrance doors to the main sanctuary. They were stripped, repaired, and refinished to be shiny, beautiful, and welcoming to members and visitors. The First Baptist Church is to be commended on its long-term care and preservation of a campus of historic buildings that have remained beautiful to the community.

In the Harold M. Bennett Lifetime Achievement Award category, an Award was presented to Dr. Alfred Willis, Architectural Historian and Consultant. Dr. Willis graduated from Valdosta High School, went on to Clemson University, and received his Doctorate at Columbia University in Architectural History. He studied in Europe, worked for the Belgian Government, retired from the Harvey Library at Hampton University, and currently works and volunteers as a Consultant. Dr. Willis has dedicated over 20 years to preserving the early, as well as modern, architecture of our community. He has also worked with local, civic-based historical preservation organizations and teaching institutions. Dr. Willis has researched, written, and lectured on the architectural history of Valdosta, including local and out of town Architects, their firms, and the structures they designed, such as the 1905 historic Courthouse, the Nichols House, and Dasher High School. Dr. Willis has built the most extensive collection of information on Valdosta's architectural narrative and because of his efforts, Valdosta probably has the best-documented architectural history of any town this size in the nation.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES

The minutes of the June 25, 2020 Regular Meeting were approved by unanimous consent (7-0) of the Council.

Consideration of a request to close a portion of Myon Street between East Adair Street and East Gordon Street.

Pat Collins, City Engineer, stated that a Petition has been prepared requesting that a portion of Myon Street between East Adair Street and East Gordon Street be vacated and closed to facilitate the expansion of an existing day care center located at 512 North Forrest Street. In June of 2020, he met with Mrs. Chanita Irvin and proposed the concept of vacating the road to combine their lot located at 512 Forrest Street with the closed right-of-way and their Myon Street lot. All existing utility providers and City Departments have reviewed the matter and have no objection to the Petition to close the street as proposed. The Petition to close Myon Street was circulated to all five adjacent property owners, and a Public Notice of the Petition was advertised in the Valdosta Daily Times as required. The Irvin’s have been waiting for one of the adjacent property owners, Mr. Vega, to sign the Petition; however, with four of the five property owner’s signatures obtained, they have met the required 60% threshold to proceed. They have since requested to move forward with the Petition and street closure. The applicant intends to convert the existing 40-foot right-of-way to a 40-foot utility easement so that all existing utilities may remain. The portion of existing pavement on Myon Street between the two homes located at 909 and 1001 East Gordon Street will be removed and replaced with two private driveways with continued access off East Gordon Street. Access will remain open to and from East Adair Street to both the new proposed day care building expansion and the existing 512 Forrest Street building. Pat Collins, City Engineer, recommended that Council approve the request to close a portion of Myon Street between East Adair Street and East Gordon Street.

A MOTION by Councilwoman Tooley, seconded by Councilman Norton, was unanimously adopted (7-0) to approve a request to close a portion of Myon Street between East Adair Street and East Gordon Street.

ORDINANCES AND RESOLUTIONS

RESOLUTION NO. 2020-6, A RESOLUTION TO APPROVE A LOAN MODIFICATION OF PROMISSORY NOTES AND LOAN AGREEMENTS WITH THE GEORGIA ENVIRONMENTAL FINANCE AUTHORITY (GEFA) FOR A SIX-MONTH INTEREST FREE DEFERRAL ON ALL NOTES CURRENTLY IN REPAYMENT

Consideration of a Resolution to approve a Loan Modification of Promissory Notes and Loan Agreements with the Georgia Environmental Finance Authority (GEFA) for a six-month interest free deferral on all Notes currently in repayment.

Chuck Dinkins, Finance Director, stated that as part of its ongoing commitment to improve its water and wastewater infrastructure, the City of Valdosta has financed several Water/Sewer Projects with the Georgia Environmental Finance Authority (GEFA) over the last few years. While these notes have allowed the City to make much needed improvements to its water system, the service on the debt represents a significant monthly cash outlay of \$538,911.53. While the City has planned for the service on each note, the current economic situation has created a degree of uncertainty regarding projections of cash flows. As a result of the ongoing COVID-19 Pandemic, GEFA has offered all current borrowers a six-month interest free deferral from July 1, 2020 to January 1, 2021 on all notes currently in repayment. In order to take advantage of the deferral, the City must adopt a Resolution authorizing the Mayor to sign a Loan Modification for each note currently in repayment with GEFA. The modifications simply delay the next payment until January, 2021 and suspend interest accruals from July 1, 2020 until January 1, 2021. Given the current strain on the economy, this deferral represents an opportunity for the City to conserve cash. In addition, the City has been using SPLOST funds to accelerate the repayment note CW13006 that financed the Force Main Project and related improvements with additional principal payments in the amount of \$378,787.92. The City can take advantage of the interest deferral and redirect these resources to current Projects. This will reduce the total amount of future borrowings and fiscal costs without increasing the interest expense associated with this note. Chuck Dinkins, Finance Director, recommended that Council approve the Resolution authorizing the City to modify its loans with GEFA to take advantage of the loan deferrals

A MOTION by Councilman Norton, seconded by Councilman Gibbs, was unanimously adopted (7-0) to enact Resolution No. 2020-6, a Resolution to approve a Loan Modification of Promissory Notes and Loan Agreements with the Georgia Environmental Finance Authority (GEFA) for a six-month interest free deferral on all Notes currently in repayment, the complete text of which will be found in Resolution Book VI.

Pastor Jimmy Boyd, 904 Brookhaven Drive, stated that he is the Senior Pastor of the greatest Church in Valdosta and is also the President of the Valdosta-Lowndes Alliance. He wanted to inform the Mayor and City Council that after the incident with the Police and Mr. Smith, our community is outraged. He wanted to go on record and let them know that our community is outraged. John Maxwell says that everything rises and falls on leadership. It is apparent, after watching the video of Mr. Smith, that our leadership has failed the citizens of Valdosta. Pastor Boyd stated that he teaches neighborhood accountability and he goes into neighborhoods and tells people that if they see something then they need to say something. When you are a leader, you don't only see something and say something, you do something. We all saw the incident involving Mr. Smith but nobody has said anything, and nobody has done anything. That is why he is here. He has a resolution and he is saying this to the Mayor personally with all respect and as humbly as he knows how. He believes that if you look back at how you handled this situation, then you will see that not all the citizens of Valdosta feel like they were protected. Pastor Boyd asked that the Mayor to resign because he believes that the Mayor has failed. Everything rises and falls on leadership and as a leader, the Mayor has failed this community. If the Mayor chooses not to resign, then the community citizens have already organized to recall his seat because Valdosta is about to change. This is a City Without Limits. Pastor Boyd stated, not only to the Mayor but to the City Council, that they all have a responsibility to uphold the people that they lead and serve. There is no way possible that an incident occurred in February and no discipline was taken. Nothing was happening and we knew about this. The City Manager, the Police Chief, and everybody else who had something to do with the incident needs to go. Valdosta is ready for a change.

Edgar Tooley, 305 South Street, stated that he represented Am Vets Post 607 which is located at 728 East Hill Avenue. In November of last year, there was a company that was doing some underground boring to run some type of utilities; however, now the sidewalks are beginning to collapse. There was a guy riding a bicycle the other day and he hit one of the bad spots on the sidewalk which caused him to fall. Mr. Tooley asked that someone go take a look at the sidewalk and hold the company accountable for damaging the sidewalks. It is a high traffic area and it needs to be fixed as soon as possible.

CITY MANAGER'S REPORT

Mark Barber, City Manager, thanked Councilwoman Tooley for the new City of Valdosta face masks that she gave the Council Members and Department Heads.

On Saturday, August 1, 2020, the City will hold its annual Back to School Community Event; however, things will be done a little different this year. Valley Street in front of the City Hall Annex will be closed and citizens will enter on one end of Valley Street and exit on the other end. City Staff will be handing out book bags with all of the school supplies.

On Wednesday, July 29, 2020, the City will be hosting the Battle of the Badges Blood Drive from 2:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m. in the City Hall Annex Multi-Purpose Room. They will also be testing for COVID-19 antibodies.

COUNCIL COMMENTS

Councilman Vickers stated that they need to join the other cities who have made it mandatory to wear a face mask to fight the COVID-19 Pandemic. That is just a little thing that we can do until we have a vaccine available. COVID-19 is very dangerous, and a lot of people are suffering from it. Sometimes we have to step out and go a little further to fight the battle. In 2002, he initiated an issue for not smoking in restaurants and he was fought in every corner against it; however, now there are no smoking signs everywhere because it saves lives. Wearing a face mask is a part of what we have to do now, and it will help to save lives. Councilman Vickers also stated that regarding the comments made about the Police incident, we did not say enough as a group publicly. We are now in litigation; however, he did not think that as a group they said enough at the beginning. It was two or three months after the incident that they found out about it. He understands about the situation but to the public, it looks like they have not done or said anything. They have had a great deal of conversation among themselves though. It was a misfortunate situation. Mark Barber, City Manager, stated that the Georgia Municipal Association (GMA) delivered an Executive Summary yesterday to Governor Brian Kemp that said that local governments should have local rule on this matter. The City of Valdosta was one of the cities that has signed on.

Councilwoman Tooley stated that we are trying to promote wearing face masks because it is very important. She is in the medical field and has seen a lot of what is happening with COVID-19. We are recommending that everyone wear a face mask. It will do a lot of good even though it may not look like it to others. It may not stop the virus, but it will slow it down. We are asking that you please wear a mask and help to promote it. Do it not only for yourself but for your loved ones. It can affect others much more than it can affect yourself. She tested positive but did not have any symptoms. She believes that due to her exposure to others at the hospital, that is where she caught it. She did self-quarantine and was re-tested and the results were negative. She has seen many people who have died from the virus and she asked for everyone to help promote wearing a face mask. Also, regarding the comments from the gentleman about the Mayor and Council, she asked that they look deeper into the type of government that the City of Valdosta has. There are different forms of government and there are certain rules that they have to follow. She asked the citizens to consider that and look into the type of form of government that we have. We are not over-looking our citizens and we are not trying to be disrespectful. That is just not true.

Councilman Howard stated that he did not have the authority to speak for everyone on the Council, but he does have the authority to speak on what is right and wrong. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Rev. John Lewis marched so that we could have a seat at the table. Now that we have a seat at the table, what are we going to do? Are we going to just be happy with a seat at the table? Councilman Howard stated that he is not because he wants to eat too. He wants to have some input in preparation of the dinner. The City of Valdosta is going through a lot right now. We are in the middle of a Pandemic, we have children who are afraid to go to school, we have parents who do not know if they want to send their children to school, and we are in the middle of financial hardships. We need to think about the Mayor and Council, and anyone who wants to reach out and contact them are able to do so because all of their phone numbers are public. He has not heard from people, but he has made some calls himself. We need for the citizens to contact the Council when they have issues or concerns. They can schedule a meeting. They are not trying to avoid anyone, and they want the citizens to be a part of the solution. This form of old fashion scare tactics and pushing people around are the ways of old. Everyone on the Council has their own form of income. No one on the Council takes care of their family off of the income they receive from being a Councilman. They all have jobs prior to this and took care of their families prior to this so if they do not have this income, then none of their families are going to go without. They are all representatives of the City although they are put into these positions by their District. They still represent the entire City of Valdosta. For all of the young people who are out there listening to this and feel like they do not have a voice or that the Council is just making decisions for them, please reach out to the Council and ask us questions. You need to get involved and do not think that your voice and concerns do not matter. We are not going to allow the narrative that Valdosta is a terrible place or that Valdosta is not a place that you want to come to. We have a lot of things that we are accomplishing, and we ask that anyone who wants to be a part of it to pull your chair up to the table and engage into some meaningful dialog. If that is not your idea of what you want to have done, then please move to the side and do not stop progress. Mr. Smith's incident is being taken care of in a civil litigation unless something else develops. He does not want anyone to think that they are taking it lightly. As far as the City Manager's position, no one knows the conversations that have taken place so they cannot speak on that. For the conversations that they had or things that they put in place with the Police Chief, no one knows that but them so they cannot speak on that. As far as the Mayor resigning, that would be a decision that the Mayor would have to make himself or if they got enough signatures then they could recall the Mayor; however, they only had 6,000 people to vote in the election and there are 60,000 people in the City of Valdosta. If they can get 32,000 signatures on a piece of paper to recall the Mayor, he would like for those 32,000 people to also fill out their U. S. Census paperwork.

Councilwoman Miller-Cody stated that she has been threatened concerning the incident that occurred with Mr. Smith; however, the City Manager has been there for her. People have called her from every area of the country and threatened her, talked about her, belittled her, and threatened to move her out to sea. The citizens do not know all that. Council has been beaten down, but they still get up every day. There have been days when she had to go speak to the other Council Members or to the City Manager. Some people do not think that Council feels what they feel, but she feels it every day. She has lived it every day. There are some days that she does not want to get up, but she does. There are neighborhoods that she goes in and people call her every name but her name and nobody is there to protect her. She has to calm her husband down because every man and child loves their mother. She keeps trying and keeps going and for others to say that they do not care hurts deeply. Like Councilman Howard stated, they do not make any money being on the Council, but they go to the neighborhoods every day.

She has walked in the rain and in the sun and it does not matter what District because she is there. If we can get people to complete their Census forms, then can get our sidewalks and streets taken care of. We are only at 58% in completing the Census forms. If every District completed the Census, then there are so many things that Valdosta could get. We are giving away money by sitting down and bickering. Let us put our pens to work and complete the Census. Also, if anyone needs a face mask, she will be glad to provide them with one. She cares about the City of Valdosta and her family. She supports the City of Valdosta 100% and she thanked the citizens for believing in her and helping her.

Mayor Matheson stated that Councilwoman Tooley stated earlier that we have a certain form of government. He is not going to make an accurate statement, but it is a passionate statement. Mayor Matheson stated that this is his Council. That is not accurate but passionate. Mayor Matheson thanked the Council for their passion and for working so hard every day. What the City Clerk, Associate City Clerk, and the Public Information Office had to go through when answering phones during that period of time not long ago was really bad. It was awful to hear and to see. From the community, it was productive one-on-one meetings. From the cowardice of the phones, E-mails, and social media, it was from people in all 50 states and it was vile. We had death threats and threats of property. The FBI had to step in, and they made two arrests in other states. We had to have an armed guard at City Hall. This is not a civilized society that we are living. Let us be the shining example.

Councilman Carroll stated that the social media posts that Councilman Gibbs shared with them showed a fine group of Valdostans at the Courthouse square holding up signs of grace, love, and caring. At a time when there is such chaos in this world and our country, we need to focus on the one important thing and that is to love one another.

ADJOURNMENT

Mayor Matheson entertained a motion for adjournment.

A MOTION by Councilman Vickers, seconded by Councilman Carroll, was unanimously adopted (7-0) to adjourn the July 23, 2020 Meeting of the Valdosta City Council at 6:21 p.m. Tim Tanner, City Attorney, stated that they need to have a brief Executive Session to discuss litigation and asked that the motion be rescinded.

A MOTION by Councilman Norton, seconded by Councilman Carroll, was unanimously adopted (7-0) to rescind the motion to adjourn.

Mayor Matheson entertained a motion to adjourn the July 23, 2020 Council Meeting and enter into Executive Session for the purpose of discussing litigation.

A MOTION by Councilman Carroll, seconded by Councilman Norton, was unanimously adopted (7-0) to adjourn the July 23, 2020 Meeting of the Valdosta City Council at 6:22 p.m. and enter into Executive Session for the purpose of discussing litigation.

Mayor Matheson reconvened the July 23, 2020 Meeting of the Valdosta City Council at 6:53 p.m. and stated that no action was taken in Executive Session.

Mayor Matheson entertained a motion for adjournment.

A MOTION by Councilman Vickers, seconded by Councilwoman Miller-Cody, was unanimously adopted (7-0) to adjourn the July 23, 2020 Meeting of the Valdosta City Council at 6:53 p.m. to meet again in Regular Session on Thursday, August 6, 2020.