

MINUTES
REGULAR MEETING OF THE VALDOSTA CITY COUNCIL
5:30 P.M., THURSDAY, JULY 22, 2021
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, Sandra Tooley, Ben Norton, Vivian Miller-Cody, Eric Howard, and Andy Gibbs. Councilman Tim Carroll and City Manager Mark Barber were absent. The invocation was given by Pastor John Robinson, followed by the Pledge of Allegiance to the American Flag.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES

The minutes of the July 8, 2021 Regular Meeting were approved by unanimous consent (6-0) of the Council.

PUBLIC HEARINGS

PUBLIC HEARING FOR ON-SITE SOLIDIFICATION OF NON-HAZARDOUS WASTE BY GEORGIA PETROLEUM

Public Hearing for on-site solidification of non-hazardous waste by Georgia Petroleum. No action will be taken.

Tim Tanner, City Attorney, stated that Georgia Petroleum has requested the Georgia Environmental Protection Division (EPD) to allow it to solidify non-hazardous waste on-site for future disposal. Currently, the local landfill does the solidification for Georgia Petroleum. Georgia Petroleum plans to do the solidification on-site. The process calls for a Public Hearing for public comment to be held in accordance with Georgia Solid Waste Management Rule 391-3-4-.03(4) which provides: (4) The governing authority of the county or municipality will hold a public hearing not less than two weeks prior to the issuance of any permit, except for a private industry disposal facility, and notice of such hearing shall be posted at the proposed site and advertised in a newspaper of general circulation serving the county or counties in which the proposed activity will be conducted, at least thirty (30) days prior to such hearing. A typed copy of the hearing transcript shall be submitted to the Division. No action is required to be taken by the City. The decision is to be ultimately made by the Georgia EPD.

Jason Crosby, General Manager of Georgia Petroleum, spoke in favor of the request. They have applied to the EPD to install a solidification pit of non-hazardous waste at their site in Lowndes County/Valdosta so that they can do their own solidification processing. Currently, the landfill in Lowndes County does this for them. They believe that by putting in this process at their facility it will allow them to be more independent and assured that they have continued growth in Lowndes County. They do not handle any hazardous waste and it is strictly non-hazardous waters and sludges.

No one spoke in opposition to the request.

Mayor Matheson stated that no action will be taken on this item and the EPD will take action on this request.

REQUEST TO CHANGE THE NAME OF FORREST STREET TO BARACK OBAMA BOULEVARD

Consideration of a request to change the name of Forrest Street to Barack Obama Boulevard.

Pat Collins, City Engineer, stated that on March 4, 2021, David Jonathan “D. J.” Davis visited the Engineering Department with a request to go over the Ordinance requirements for changing the name of Forrest Street to Barack Obama Boulevard. At the meeting, Mr. Davis was provided the following details of the procedure: (1) the timeline for submittals, reviews, and advertising, (2) a map and spreadsheet listing of abutting parcels with owners’ names and addresses, and (3) a document with photos of each developed parcel listed by address. The total

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number of abutting parcels falling within the City Limits of Forrest Street (excluding the five City-owned parcels with support that is pending based on tonight's City Council's action) is 279 parcels. Thus, the minimum 60% signature requirement for advancing the Petition to the Mayor and City Council for final consideration is 168 signatures. A Petition was circulated and Staff verified the 172 signatures; therefore, the Petition has exceeded the 60% signature requirement required by Ordinance No. 2019-2. All signature names were verified using property records, the customer service database, or contacting by phone those that signed the Petition. As required by Ordinance, a public notice was run in the Valdosta Daily Times on June 25, 2021 and July 2, 2021 to advertise the subject of this street renaming and to provide the hearing time and date of July 22, 2021 at 5:30 p.m. Pat Collins, City Engineer, stated that he would leave this with the Mayor and Council for consideration.

Mayor Matheson stated that this is a Public Hearing and the maximum time for both sides to speak either for or against is 15 minutes. You can have one person as the spokesperson for the group and use the entire 15 minutes or you can have several speak during that same timeframe.

D. J. Davis, former President of the Valdosta State University's Action Club, which is a Sociology Club, spoke in favor of the request. Mr. Davis thanked the Mayor and Council for this time to share their hope for the future. They are not here today to dwell on the past but rather focus on how we can reconcile and recognize our shared history together as a community in South Georgia. To quote Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., "Our goal is to create a beloved community and this will require a qualitative change in our souls as well as a quantitative change in our lives." We bring before you today the signatures of 172 of the residents, homeowners, and businesses of Forrest Street who supported the initiative to rename it to Barack Obama Boulevard. An overwhelming majority of businesses that touch the street signed this Petition. Changing the name of Forrest Street will put to rest a long-time unresolvable concern with how it is spelled or for whom it is named. Doing so will give the street a presence of strength, history, and a forward-looking hope for a just, peaceful, and diverse Valdosta community. It is a quiet street. It is populated with business owners and the black men and women who helped build the City of Valdosta. They worked hard at the cookie factory and at Levi's. They were servants in households and held other jobs throughout the community. When they were tired, they came to live in peace on the street as citizens who shared a unique history. Renaming this street is a testament to the contribution of black citizens in Valdosta. It will give elders a sense of pride and peace as well as hope for the future of their children and our community as we work together to continue to build and strengthen the City Without Limits as a model for others to follow and admire. Naming the street after a role model like President Obama is particularly important at this moment in history when diversity and inclusiveness are at the forefront of who we are as Americans. It is a reminder to young black, white, and brown men and women who are growing up in our community that they, like Obama, can come from a single, simple beginning and with commitment and perseverance achieve great things. They too can bring about Rev. King's call for a qualitative change in our souls as well as the quantitative change in our lives to make Valdosta a better place for us all. The cost to residents is nominal and anyone can change their address for free if they go to the Post Office in person or they can pay \$1.00 on-line. They called Mediacom and other utilities to confirm that they did not charge for changing an address. They also already succeeded in raising the money to cover the City's cost to change the signs. Finally, he invited a Driver Examiner from the local Department of Motor Vehicles to address the concerns about driver's licenses. All they will have to do is to go to the Driver's License Office and change their address for free; however, the second time it is \$5.00. The renaming of Forrest Street to Barack Obama Boulevard will be a crucial step towards achieving the vision of a beloved community in Valdosta. We urge you to pass approve the request today as a symbol of our community's commitment to move it forward into a united, diverse, and peaceful co-existence.

Dr. Michael Noll, 2305 Glynndale Drive, spoke in favor of the request. Dr. Noll stated that he represents the Valdosta Coalition for Peace and Justice and all of the members. They are fully in favor of changing the name to Barack Obama Boulevard. He has written about this once or twice in the Valdosta Daily Times and he congratulated D. J. Davis on doing an awesome job with his presentation today.

Dr. Susan Wheling, 2410 Georgia Avenue, spoke in favor of the request. Dr. Wheling stated that it would be nice to see Valdosta in the national news in a positive light. She loves the diversity here and the respect that everybody shows whether they are a Viking or a Wildcat or whether you are Republican or Democrat. This would be great to show the nation that we are a kind, progressive, and supportive community.

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Vicky Elliott, 3700 Wild Meadow Circle, spoke in favor of the request. Ms. Elliott stated that we are in the midst of a lot of positive and much needed and long-awaited change. This is a very much needed change.

Christine Koon, 509 North Forrest Street, spoke in favor of the request. Ms. Koon stated that she was thrilled to hear this and she is in favor of it 100%. She thanked D. J. Davis for doing this and she is truly excited about it.

No one spoke in opposition to the request.

A MOTION was made by Councilwoman Miller-Cody to change the name of Forrest Street to Barack Obama Boulevard. Councilman Howard seconded the motion. Councilman Gibbs stated that he wanted to share some information that he presented to Councilman Howard, Councilman Vickers, and Councilman Carroll. He also spoke with D. J. Davis about it as well. There was an African-American by the name of Elbert Forrest who was a great community leader. Rev. Elbert Forrest was born in 1837 and died in 1922. His wife, Louise, was born in 1838 and died in 1900. His daughter was Haddie Forrest, who was an Educator in Valdosta, was born in 1867 and died in 1959. They are all three buried here at Sunset Hill Cemetery. Councilman Gibbs stated that he wanted to bring this up to Council that there was a great man who had a great legacy and this legacy can continue. Rev. Elbert Forrest was appointed a Missionary from the Thomasville Association in 1874. He reported traveling 440 miles preaching sermons, baptizing people, attending prayer meetings, and helping the sick. Despite these terrible times, he decided that his life meant reaching others. He made an impact on people despite difficult times. Amanda Usher, Reporter with the Valdosta Daily Times, wrote an article on Elbert Forrest, "The Man of Mystery – Getting to Know Elbert Forrest." He quoted the following: Deacon Harry Jenkins says that he disagrees with the people who claim the street could not have been named for a black man during the 1800's in the South. "I don't agree with that. I don't. Ain't no way a black man could have that kind of clout." Jenkins said, "Yes, it could be because his daddy was supposed to be a good man. Everyone knows that his son was a good man." Elbert Forrest was a shingle supplier with Valdosta Institute according to the Archives of Lowndes County and he could also weld. He lived 253 Oak Street which is next door to where the First Antioch Baptist Church is at. His brother was a Brick Mason and actually laid the brick at that Church. His daughter was a Secretary at the Church. He moved the Church in 1840 from Troupville when it shut down to Valdosta and then a storm took it out; however, they turned around and rebuilt it again in 1868. He was an advocate of this community and he did a lot for this community. Some people feel that the street could not be named after him, but it was not until August of 1977 is when the name went from one "r" to two "r's" in Forrest. If you go back and do research, you will find articles on Elbert Forrest who was a farmer, there is a 1969 Inspections Report with North Forest having one "r." There is a map from 1977 and Dr. Noll can also attest to this in an article he wrote, "Not Seeing the Forrest for the Trees." We have an opportunity to put bronze plaques at both ends of Forrest Street at the City's cost and do a Proclamation to set in stone to make sure that we uphold Elbert Forrest's legacy. Councilman Gibbs stated, "I am providing the facts and information and at the end of the day, all I want to do is simply make a motion to table the renaming of Forrest Street so that the citizens of this great community, the citizens in this room, and the Council Members can take the information that he shared and decide what is the best route for renaming Forrest Street." We owe this to the great legacy of Rev. Elbert Forrest, his family, and his Church. Councilman Howard stated that there was already a motion on the floor. Mayor Matheson stated that he realized that and if the motion on the floor does not pass there will be one to be introduced if that one does not pass. Tim Tanner, City Attorney, inquired as to whether it was a motion to postpone to a definite time. Councilman Gibbs stated that he would like to table it to the next City Council Meeting. Councilman Norton stated that he appreciated what Councilman Gibbs has brought forth and it is unfortunate that they did not all have that information prior to the Council Meeting. With that being said, what is before them has every "i" dotted and every "t" has been crossed. They have approved the renaming of many streets in honor and in memory of many people local and otherwise and because of that, the due diligence has been done and he called for the question. Tim Tanner, City Attorney, stated that there has to be a second on the motion Councilman Gibbs made. Mayor Matheson entertained a second on that motion. There was no second so the motion died due to the lack of a second.

Mayor Matheson stated that they would proceed with any further Council comments on the original motion. Councilman Howard thanked Councilman Gibbs for giving us a reason now to name Oak Street after Mr. Forrest. If everything you say is true, he lived on Oak Street and that would be a perfect opportunity to name that street after Mr. Forrest; however, Forrest Street already has a name that the Petitioners went out to get changed.

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Who is named after it at this point in time is irrelevant to what their discussion is. The time to do the research and change the name or give the Petitioners an opportunity would have been years ago when they brought it before Council. His only thing is that he would like to ask Council and the Mayor what they can do after they vote on this. They can make a lot of this a lot simpler on them and change the Ordinance to say that no street, no building, no alley, no anything in the City of Valdosta will be named after any terrorist, foreign or domestic, any Nazi sympathizer, any Holocaust denier, or anything like that. They can make that change in the Ordinance just like that so if they had a street or building that came up it would not even be an issue. They have an opportunity to let people know. We are not the same as other cities and States. To name a street right now after President Obama would mean a lot to the same people who have been marginalized in this City for so long. You think about the people who lived on that street. Black people did not even live on that street but now they do. Just the suggestion of saying that a street in 1837 to 1922 when Elbert Forrest lived was named after him is hard to believe. We know that black people were still getting hung and killed as late as the 80's in the United States. They have an opportunity to vote on the issues that D. J. Davis brought up and set an example. We are a hub city and all of the smaller cities around us may say if Valdosta can do it then why can't we do it. Councilman Howard stated that he would go ahead with Councilman Norton and Councilwoman Miller-Cody and vote and right this wrong. Councilwoman Miller-Cody stated that she lived on Cypress Street and Forrest Street in 1970 and her children could not play with the other children on Forrest Street. They could only go so far because the white people who lived there did not allow the black children to even come in their yard. There was a grocery store called Colonial Store where the Salvation Army is and they did not have cars so they had to push their buggies. When they got in front of those houses, they had to push really fast because the Caucasian ladies were sitting on their porches. She had to walk her children down that street so for this street to be renamed makes her feel more dignified. She knows what was on Forrest Street from 1969 to now because she was in that area. Her children could not even ride the bus to school and had to walk. Mayor Matheson stated that it was an impressive effort to get those signatures and he humbly requested that D. J. Davis stay with those people on that street and help guide them through the change. The motion was adopted (5-1) with Councilman Gibbs voting in opposition.

CITIZENS TO BE HEARD

Earlene Deans, 14 Pinedale Circle, stated that she has lived in Valdosta for 31 years and during all this time, her cul-de-sac has not been paved. There is a spot in front of her home and she was told that it was not deep enough for them to patch it or fill it in. Ms. Deans asked Council's consideration in helping her get this particular area repaved.

Wanda Bennett, 4 Pinedale Circle, stated that she just came to Valdosta in December of 2020 and she is a homeowner in that area. Ms. Deans had brought it to her attention about the street needing repaving. As a taxpayer and homeowner, she is concerned and would like to see that this issue is taken care of. Ms. Bennett inquired as to whether funds could be allocated for repaving the street. Also, she is very concerned about the mentally ill in Valdosta. She sees a black gentleman who walks up and down Bemiss Road and he appears to be mentally ill. He needs some personal hygiene taken care of and she inquired as to whether there was some place he could be taken to. She wants someone to go out and help him without scaring him.

Willie Rayford, 1200 Lake Park Road, stated that he has lived here for over 50 years and plans on dying there. While he was on vacation, the City came and dug up the dirt in the ditch in front of his house and left it. It looks really bad. Instead of putting pipes in and do it the right way, their idea was just to let the water go by. He is very upset about it and would like for the Mayor and Council to look into and put it back the way it was before. Also, he is concerned about the positions in the City of Valdosta for black people. They are asking for a black Assistant City Manager, a black Assistant Fire Chief, and a black Assistant Police Chief. They need to look at giving those individuals who are qualified some of those positions.

John Robinson, 3227 San Juline Circle, Lake Park, stated that he wanted to congratulate everyone on getting the name changed for Forrest Street. He would also like for them to work together on the Incubator Project and asked for Council's consideration in moving ahead and working diligently to bring some changes to Valdosta.

George Boston Rhynes, 5004 Oak Drive, stated that he wanted to thank Council for changing the name of Forrest Street and he commended Councilman Gibbs for exercising his rights under our Constitution and the laws

that are in place. As a retired Military Veteran of over 20 years, he would like for this to be recorded in the Minutes to substantiate this truth for generations to come. He has heard the City Manager say that no part of the Ordinance was changed about renaming streets. He bears witness tonight that the City Manager is 100% wrong. The Ordinance was changed and he has it on video. There is other documentation to show that the Ordinance that was changed is extremely longer than what the Ordinance that was. He has that document and he will stand before Jesus, Moses, and Mohamad to show that he speaks the truth tonight. Let the historical archival record stand that Reverend Rose and The People's Tribunal went out to do what the old Ordinance required of them. They are not crazy people. He wants the truth to be maintained and that is why he has it on video just in case. They know too often that the news media does not see us. We see them but John 8:32 says "And ye shall know the truth and that the truth will set you free." Mr. Rhynes stated that he thanked God for the freedoms in this nation today because like you black and white people did today, others that came this way, believed in what was right, what was just, and what God approved of. Paul in Galatians said, "For God is not mocked for whatsoever a man sow that shall he also reap." So, we are noticing the fulfillment of Divine Prophecy.

CITY MANAGER'S REPORT

Catherine Ammons, Deputy City Manager of Administration, stated that the Valdosta Fire and Police Departments will be hosting their annual Battle of the Badges Blood Drive on Wednesday, July 28, 2021 from 10:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. at the City Hall Annex Multi-Purpose Room located at 300 North Lee Street. City employees, retirees, their families and friends, as well as members of the general public are invited to give the gift of life at this event. The American Red Cross continues to experience a severe blood shortage that is negatively affecting blood product availability across the country and in Lowndes County. Donors of all blood types, especially Type O and those giving platelets, are urged to make an appointment.

Also, regarding the four City of Valdosta first responders who were injured last Monday, two of them still remain hospitalized and one who was previously released had surgery today and is doing very well. He will stay overnight and hopefully be released again in the morning. The Police Officer is recovering at home and we want to give thanks to the community for all the support received over the past week and a half. It has been extremely grateful and humbling. The fund that was set up at Guardian Bank to benefit these employees was at \$30,000 as of this morning.

COUNCIL COMMENTS

Mayor Matheson stated that there have been 92 new cases of COVID-19 in Lowndes County in the past week so we need to be cautious and courteous to all those around us. There is a ribbon cutting underway right now for the Selfie Museum located at 124 North Patterson Street. Council is invited to attend. Also, on Sunday, July 25, 2021, we will say our earthly good-byes to former City Councilman and Mayor Pro Tem Willie T. Head, Jr. The service will be at Union Cathedral Church located on East Hill Avenue. He led a wonderful life of service in the defense of his country and to this community as well.

Councilwoman Miller-Cody stated that our hearts are heavy because Councilman Head was a great leader in the City of Valdosta and Lowndes County. She would also like to salute our Police Chief and our Fire Chief on how they rallied as a family when the first responders were injured. Both Chiefs greeted the families at the hospital and did a tremendous job in supporting those who were injured. We need to continue to offer our prayers for their recovery. They do so much for us and when one is hurt all of us hurt because we are connected. Also, she attends Georgia Municipal Association (GMA) Meetings and we need to be careful in Valdosta and Lowndes County with the COVID-19 virus. At this time in the State of Georgia, the death rate is rising daily due to COVID. We need to make sure all of our EMS and 911 employees are vaccinated because if they are not and they get COVID then who will be managing the system. That is one of the things that GMA is asking us to make sure they are vaccinated. We also need to make sure our young people are vaccinated.

Councilman Eric Howard stated that we have seen a lot of outreach for the Police Officers and Fire Fighters who were hurt and we need to continue to donate money and send words of encouragement. Also, 95% of the people who are being admitted have the COVID-19 Delta strain and they are young people. Councilman Howard thanked D. J. Davis and his group for their work in getting Forrest Street and he thanked Council for voting the way they did.

Councilwoman Miller-Cody asked the Associate City Clerk Taylor Marzell to stand. Taylor is going to be leaving us and this is her last Council Meeting. Councilwoman Miller-Cody asked everyone to thank Taylor for her service to the City of Valdosta.

ADJOURNMENT

Mayor Matheson entertained a motion for adjournment.

A MOTION by Councilman Vickers, seconded by Councilman Norton, was unanimously adopted (6-0) to adjourn the July 22, 2021 Meeting of the Valdosta City Council at 6:25 p.m. to meet again in Regular Session on Thursday, August 5, 2021.

City Clerk, City of Valdosta

Mayor, City of Valdosta