

MINUTES
MEETING OF THE VALDOSTA CITY COUNCIL
5:30 P.M., THURSDAY, MAY 25, 2023
COUNCIL CHAMBERS, CITY HALL

OPENING CEREMONIES

Mayor Matheson called the regular meeting of the Valdosta City Council to order at 5:30 p.m. Council members present were: Thomas McIntyre, Andy Gibbs, Sandra Tooley, Eric Howard, Ben Norton, and Vivian Miller-Cody. Councilman Tim Carroll was absent. 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 2023 Valdosta Historic Preservation Awards.

Jeff Brammer, Senior Planner/Historic Preservation, stated that the Valdosta Historic Preservation Awards began in 2009. Each May, in collaboration with National Historic Preservation Month (observed annually in May), the Valdosta Historic Preservation Commission recognizes local preservation activities. These activities include the preservation and rehabilitation of both residential and commercial properties located within the Valdosta Local Historic District. Since 2009, the Valdosta Preservation Awards have recognized 37 total Projects, ranging from smaller residential preservation to large-scale commercial rehabilitations. The awards have also recognized six individuals for lifetime achievement due to their substantial commitment to local preservation. The 2023 Valdosta Preservation Awards will recognize five Projects. These Projects were selected for recognition by a committee consisting of members of the local Historic Preservation Commission, the Valdosta Heritage Foundation, and the Lowndes County Historical Society. The categories for this year's awards include Outstanding Achievement, Stewardship, Distinguished Merit, and Excellence in New/Compatible Construction. Jeff Brammer, Senior Planner/Historic Preservation, Mayor Scott James Matheson, and Dr. Alex Alvarez, Chairman of the Historic Preservation Commission presented the following 2023 Valdosta Preservation Award winners: (1) 1609 North Patterson Street (United Way) - Distinguished Merit (Small-Scale Projects), (2) 202 East Alden Avenue (Avery Walden) - Excellence in New/Compatible Construction (Compatible with Existing Historic District), (3) 904 North Patterson Street (The Crescent Complex) - Stewardship (Long-Term Preservation), (4) 220 North Patterson Street (First Methodist Church) - Outstanding Achievement (Large-Scale Projects), and (5) 101 East Central Avenue (The McKey) - Outstanding Achievement (Large-Scale Projects).

APPROVAL OF MINUTES

The minutes of the Regular Meeting of May 11, 2023 were approved by unanimous consent (6-0) of the Council.

ORDINANCES AND RESOLUTIONS

ORDINANCE NO. 2023-12, AN ORDINANCE TO AMEND THE REQUIREMENTS AND PROCEDURES FOR THE RENAMING AND/OR CLOSING OF STREETS (SECOND READING)

Consideration of an Ordinance to amend the requirements and procedures for the renaming and/or closing of streets. (Second Reading)

Ben O'Dowd, City Engineer, stated that we discussed the changes to this Ordinance in detail at the May 11, 2023 Regular Council Meeting. One of the main concerns from that last Meeting was the addition of some language to provide for and require the advertisement of street closures and street renamings using the available social media platforms that the City maintains. The added text is highlighted in yellow and it appears in both the road closure and the road renaming section of the Ordinance. This should sufficiently provide adequate advertisement via the social media platforms that the City maintains. This will help citizens to stay in the loop when this comes up again in the future.

A **MOTION** by Councilman Norton, seconded by Councilman McIntyre, was unanimously adopted (6-0) to enact Ordinance No. 2023-12, an Ordinance to amend the requirements and procedures for the renaming and/or closing of streets along with the highlighted changes in yellow, the complete text of which will be found in Ordinance Book XIV.

CITIZENS TO BE HEARD

Alfred Willis stated that he represents his clients, the Quality of Life Association of Valdosta, and he is an Architectural Historian of 4153 Stonehall Boulevard, Hermitage, Tennessee. The City of Valdosta has threatened to demolish the structure at 400 South Ashley Street subject to a hearing in Municipal Court which is set for June 12, 2023. This structure is what remains of the eastern half of a large, multi-use entertainment and retail complex including the Liberty Theater and Liberty Club which both opened in 1941. It is now owned by the non-profit Quality of Life Association and it is one of the chief contributing properties of Valdosta's Southside Historic District which is a National Register District. It is one of the earliest pieces of international style modern architecture in Valdosta and is one of the best commercial examples of that style to be found anywhere in south Georgia. It is significant not only to Georgia's architectural history but also to Georgia's business history since it was built to serve the Martin Theater chain during its expansion into one of the south's leading businesses. It is especially significant to the African-American cultural heritage of Valdosta. During the Jim Crow era, the Liberty complex anchored Valdosta's so called "Colored Business District" on South Ashley Street. For decades, both the Liberty Theater and the Liberty Club brought to Valdosta many of America's best performing artists such as people of the caliber of Ella Fitzgerald to name one example. To Black Valdostans of the mid-20th Century, those venues represented almost the only opportunity to socialize and enjoy life in high quality surroundings. Therefore, the structure at 400 South Ashley Street embodies many of their most present memories remaining from a difficult era. It is a treasure on par with The Crescent and deserves to be treasured. It is imperative that Valdosta preserve this landmark for the enjoyment and education of future generations of both locals and visitors. He thanked the Mayor and Council for allowing him to bring to their attention the importance of the Liberty complex and the fight of its component at 400 South Ashley Street.

Erica Hill-Miller, member of the Quality of Life Association, stated that she was here tonight to ask Council for their support of the Liberty Theater and the Liberty Club. They need help to stabilize it and return it to the original status as a Valdosta showcase. They believe if they can preserve this landmark that is registered in the National Historic Southside of the Valdosta Historic District, it will be a great landmark for tourism. She thinks that no one wants to see the Liberty Theater and the Liberty Club demolished. It would be a disgrace to this community to see such rich history go to waste. They agree with the City in that they need to do something with the buildings. As a non-profit organization, they can only do so much alone. She has reached out to many City officials and she is asking for more support from the Council. If she goes to the Valdosta Historic Preservation Office, she wants to feel welcome and receive information without being told that you are not on the map for the Local Historic District. They are on the National Registry for the Historic District map. She wanted to bring awareness and ask for support. Their next Court date is June 12, 2023. The Municipal Court Judge told them that they need to have secured Grant Funding, which is so unrealistic, by June 12th. They need additional time and possibly individual meetings with City Council. They do not want to see the building demolished. They do not want to have to give up ownership in order to get support. They would like any donation funding or support in helping them to preserve it. They want to get a banner like the others received here tonight and to see the Liberty Club and Liberty Theater to be recognized.

Janice Monico stated that she lives in Councilman Carroll's District. She wanted to bring her concern to Council about property taxes. She understands that most of the taxes are from the County but as a City Council, she hopes that they represent them to the County Commissioners. Her first argument is that in previous years, the City Council has rolled back the millage rate to 7.542. Last year, the millage rate was brought up to 7.796. This year, rather than go back to the rollback rate, the millage rate stayed at 7.796. This increased her property tax 3.37%. It does not sound like a lot until you pay it out. Also, a City Councilman and the County Tax Assessor both told her that assessments are done by quadrant so it takes a few years to get back to your quadrant. She was assessed last year and this year. She has only been here two and a half years and she is not happy. She is thinking that they made a mistake coming to Valdosta. They moved here because her mother came from Valdosta and they always thought it was a great place; however, she has changed her mind. The Homestead Exemption has not

increased with her assessment. Her assessment went up 28.87% in two years. She should get more of a Homestead Exemption. Other counties give senior citizens a break on school taxes. Can you ask the County Commissioners why we do not get that break? She is not happy and she and her husband are regretting their move to Valdosta.

Kelley Saxton stated that she serves as the Representative for the Region IV Advisory Council for DBHDD. She is asking for the Mayor and Council's consideration for a Bridge Program with Georgia Vocational Rehabilitation for a Support Position such as entry level Custodian or Sanitation positions. Vocational Rehabilitation works to achieve employment and independence for Georgians with disabilities. The Program's local office is located in the Department of Labor. This partnership would be inclusive and help individuals who desire and are able to work but have limitations such as obtaining a high school diploma, a GED, or a driver's license in order to be employed by the City. Known as a City Without Limits, this Bridge Program chips away at barriers for able-bodied citizens. Lastly, many thanks for your partnership, attendance, sponsorship, proclamation, and support for the Breaking Barriers Event that was held last month.

CITY MANAGER'S REPORT

Richard Hardy, City Manager, stated that next week we will celebrate City of Valdosta employees with an Employee Appreciation Day on Wednesday, May 31, 2023 at Saunders Park. Food trucks will be on-site and employees will be given an opportunity to take a break and enjoy the food trucks.

On Thursday, June 1, 2023, there will be open testing for the Valdosta Police Department at 6:00 p.m. at the City Hall Annex building in the Multi-Purpose Room.

On Wednesday, June 14, 2023, there will be a Goodwill Youth Tour of the City Departments from 9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.

The Boozy Flea Market will be held today at 5:30 p.m. at Unity Park. There will be a band on site along with art and vintage vendors.

COUNCIL COMMENTS

Councilwoman Tooley stated that she was glad to hear someone talk about the historical buildings in Black areas because they are some. She can remember the buildings they spoke about tonight and it does make you feel good to know that you were a part of the building and the history here in Valdosta. As a citizen who has lived in Valdosta for close to 70 years, she has seen a lot of the buildings that they were talking about tonight. The Black buildings need some recognition too even though Valdosta does not seem to have Black history. She was glad that they spoke about the Liberty Theater and she hopes that everything will go well with it.

Councilman Howard stated that he wanted to address the citizen who spoke about her taxes. Even though the taxes are assessed by the County, he inquired as to whether there was anything that we could do to help citizens with the appeal process. Secondly, Ms. Hill stated that they are on the National Registry and he would like to see if there is anything that Council can do to help her and possibly extend the date if there is any funding coming in.

Mayor Matheson stated that the Lowndes County Board of Assessors makes the initial assessment. There is a trigger number to appeals. There is a certain percent, which is 10%, that triggers a reassessment. The outrage has been pretty great and either way, you get an individual hearing and reassessment. On the Liberty Theater, he had come to Council and asked to shift some ARPA money to help them; however, the ARPA money comes with stipulations that it be for public use and public trust. His offer for \$500,000 for restoration for the Liberty Theater unfortunately came with the stipulation that it be surrendered for public use. He does understand that they are under a tight timeline and we will try to explore that option and others as well.

ADJOURNMENT

Mayor Matheson entertained a motion for adjournment.

A **MOTION** by Councilman Howard, seconded by Councilman Norton, was unanimously adopted (6-0) to adjourn the May 25, 2023 Regular Meeting of the Valdosta City Council at 6:14 p.m. to meet again in Regular Session on Thursday, June 8, 2023.

City Clerk, City of Valdosta

Mayor, City of Valdosta