

CITY BEAT

City of Valdosta

NOVEMBER - DECEMBER 2021



STORIES COMPOSED BY CITY OF VALDOSTA PUBLIC
INFORMATION OFFICE

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"With various ways to obtain information from the city, this podcast will offer a unique option to hear about what's going on in the city on the go, without looking at a screen of some sort."

- Ashlynn Johnson Valdosta
City PIO

BEHIND THE BADGE



*Get to know
the Men and
Women
Serving in
our Public
Safety
Departments*



FIREFIGHTER LUIS RODRIGUEZ



Though most emergencies are difficult to plan for, there is comfort in knowing that help is available through those that work in Public Safety. Public Safety involves protecting the public from crimes, disasters, and other potential dangers or threats in their simplest form. Behind the Badge aims to showcase the courageous men and women who serve in our Public Safety fields for the City of Valdosta. In this issue, we sat down with Firefighter Luis Rodriguez with the Valdosta Fire Department and Sergeant Ishmael Washington with Valdosta Police Department.



As a prior military member, Rodriguez enjoys helping people, which drew him to a career in fire services. Before joining the department, he previously served in the United States Army for about four years and worked in corrections for two. Aside from assisting on calls, Firefighter Rodriguez enjoys the amount of time the department spends training.

He says, "I enjoy a lot of the training that we do. The hands-on training is my favorite part and, of course, when we get to go help somebody in their time of need." Though rewarding, a career in the fire service can require more than some may assume.

FIREFIGHTER RODRIGUEZ HAS BEEN WITH VFD FOR FIVE YEARS

Each 24-hour shift has duty hours from 8 AM until 5 PM daily. They start off the day by performing standard truck and firehouse maintenance like cleaning or checking gear and equipment. The crews have designated training days on either Mondays and Wednesdays, or Tuesdays and Thursdays.

When they are not training, crews have additional duty assignments such as installing smoke detectors in people's homes, teaching fire prevention at local schools or daycares, or servicing fire hydrants around the city to ensure adequate water flow.



When offering advice to new firefighters, Rodriguez says, "Make sure you are physically and mentally prepared for the job. Of course, it is a physical job, but so much of it requires being in the right headspace to respond to medical calls, accidents, or fires. You cannot take that home with you. It helps to talk to the other people on your team." He believes that the department has come a long way in mental health and says that it goes above and beyond to get its employees the help they need. "You can always let your Sergeant or Lieutenant know that you want to seek counseling, and they will set it up for you to get the help you need," said Rodriguez.

Outside of work, Firefighter Rodriguez likes to spend his time at the gym or with his family, who also live in Valdosta. He especially enjoys spending time with his 8-year-old daughter whenever he gets the chance.



SERGEANT ISHMAEL WASHINGTON

Like Rodriquez, Sergeant Washington also has a military background. He served as an Aircraft Fuel Mechanic for the United States Airforce for five years and spent that time stationed at Moody AFB. Washington wanted to continue in a career field that impacted others after his time in the military. "After my time serving in the military, I wanted to do a job that I thought mattered. Some people are meant to wear a uniform, and I feel like I am one of them," said the Sergeant. He also enjoys the family-like relationship formed within the department and compares it to his time in the Air Force.



"The people I work with are my favorite part about working for the department. I know many jobs say we are like a family here, but when their lives are in your hands and yours in theirs, there is no choice to have your co-workers be more than co-workers.

Not many jobs are like that, and that was probably the biggest draw to being a cop for me," said Washington.

Though his family is proud of Washington's work with the department, his parents were a bit nervous when he first started. However, Washington feels that with transparency and familiarity, they have come to see that it is just like another job.

SERGEANT WASHINGTON HAS BEEN WITH VPD FOR OVER THREE YEARS



The Sergeant enjoys his time on patrol and says that his main goal within the department is to be a better cop every time he puts his uniform on. He says, "Anything else I have my eyes on is going to stem from me being a better cop, so I want to do the best I can." He credits his outlook to his previous Sergeants and believes if he can pass down the training that he was given to someone else, it will be a career well spent.

The best advice Sergeant Washington says he can offer recruits is to utilize your most essential tools: your mouth and your mind. "You have a lot of tools on your belt that can do a lot of stuff. The two most important tools you have are your mouth and your mind. They will save your life. You can defuse a lot with your words, and you can rationalize a lot of situations with your mind," said Washington.

Outside of work Sergeant Washington enjoys reading, working out, cooking, and spending time with his wife and five-year-old son.





VETERAN HEADSTONE CLEANING

"This makes the statement that we care about what goes on out here,"

The City of Valdosta's Public Works Department created a new event that shows appreciation for our courageous veterans who have passed on.

Many brave men and women fight for our freedom every day, and it is vital to show our gratitude for their sacrifice, which continues after these real-life superheroes are no longer with us. Thus, the bi-annual Veteran's Headstone Cleaning Event.

Over time, headstones can become grimy from their constant outdoor exposure.

"With all the rain and humidity we get in the South, mold will accumulate on the stone and make it difficult to read. We hope this event will help clear some of that up so people can read the names of their loved ones. Some of the individuals out here no longer have living relatives that can help keep their stones clean. So, I think doing this makes the statement that we care about what goes on out here," said Cemetery Supervisor Mark Coppage.

Sunset Hill Cemetery
1100 N Oak St,
Valdosta, GA 31601

The first Veteran's Headstone Cleaning event took place on Saturday, October 16. City employees and volunteers gathered at the cemetery and cleaned every headstone belonging to a fallen vet. There was a total of 60 volunteers in attendance, including members of the Azalea City Women's Group and Combat Vets Motorcycle Association members, Justin Danielson Chapter XO, and Chapter Sargent of Arms Charles Price. The Combat Vets Motorcycle Association was founded by the 45 original members in 2001 and established as a non-profit organization.



Their main objective is to assist all veterans. This volunteer event fell perfectly in line with that mission. “Part of our mission is vets helping vets retired from all wars. That includes veterans that have passed on. So, we like to do what we can for those who have served this country,” said Danielson.

Danielson has been a member of the organization since 2019 and currently serves at Moody Airforce Base as a Field System Mechanic. He says that volunteering is just a tiny part of what the organization does, as they hold many fundraiser events throughout the year where all the proceeds go towards programs that aid veterans.

“Basically, we raise money and donate it back to the veterans in our community,” said fellow Combat Vets Motorcycle Association member Charles Price.

Price has been involved with the group for nearly three years and served in Desert Storm in Normandy.

The city plans to host two Veteran’s Headstone Cleaning Events annually, one in the Spring near Memorial Day and one in the Fall near Veteran’s Day.

“We wanted to use this event as a way to show our appreciation to our fallen soldiers for what they did in the past to get us where we are today,” said Community Sustainability Coordinator Teresa Turner. “Events such as these would not be possible without such volunteers and are essential in building community relations. The city thanks those that assisted with the event and looks forward to seeing everyone again in the Spring.”



SPLIST PROJECTS



EACH YEAR.
THE CITY
SUCCESSFULLY
IMPLEMENTS
PROJECTS TO
IMPROVE OUR
COMMUNITY.





During the holiday season, stores in Valdosta see a little extra spending as shoppers go out to find gifts for their loved ones. The extra sales during this season impact our community in a big way.

Throughout Georgia, state law allows local communities to use Special Purpose Local Option Sales Tax (SPLOST) proceeds for capital improvement projects.

These projects can include installing sidewalks, improving public roadways and intersections, and interstate exit enhancements, to name a few.

Valdosta has benefited from the passing of this law since 2006 and is currently on its eighth period of project completion, also known as SPLOST VIII.

A SPLOST period can last anywhere between six and seven years.

Presently, the city has about eight projects remaining in SPLOST VII, all in different stages of development.

The following projects were made possible through SPLOST VII & SPLOST VIII funding:

- Exit 16 Gateway Enhancements (Under Development)
- Fry Street Sidewalk Construction
- South Toombs Street Sidewalk
- Jerry Jones / Eager Road Right of Way Acquisition
- South Lee Street Sidewalk Construction

GORDON STREET SIDEWALK

The most recent project completed would be the installation of a mile of sidewalk at South Lee Street.

"We completed this project toward the end of September, and we now have better connectivity between Martin Luther King Drive and Griffin Avenue," said Development Review Engineer Kevin Tolliver.

Valdosta officials prioritize making the city more walkable and pedestrian-friendly, which played a significant role in selecting this project.

"These locations without sidewalks cause citizens to walk on the shoulder or in the street, so there is an increased likelihood of them being hit by a vehicle. These sidewalks make for safer travel," said Tolliver.

Tolliver also emphasizes the importance of the SPLOST program by saying, "If we could not rely on SPLOST, these projects would take a lot longer to make happen. That sales tax helps with so many projects."



Without the program, the funds for these projects would otherwise be paid for with General Fund and property tax revenues or may not be accomplished at all.

The department is gearing up for their next SPLOST project, which will be the construction of sidewalks and drainages at South Fry Street. The project recently received approval from city council members and is set to begin in late November and be completed sometime next year.

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT BLOCK GRANT PROGRAM

(CDBG)

Neighborhood Development

Valdosta has participated
in the CDBG program
since 2004



Per the American Housing Survey (AHS) standards, about six million homes in the United States are considered substandard. The AHS is sponsored by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and is conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau. Since 2004, the City of Valdosta has participated in the Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) Program, with the primary objective being to eradicate substandard housing in at-need neighborhoods throughout the city. The city's Neighborhood Development Division oversees this program.

In the early 2000's Valdosta became what is known as an entitlement community based on federal formula data. Upon receiving that designation, the city was no longer required to compete for funding each year and instead is given an annual allocation through HUD. City Councilmembers decided they wanted to utilize that funding primarily for the eradication of substandard housing.

Through the funding provided to the CDBG Program by HUD, the city has reconstructed or replaced many dilapidated homes. It is one of the reasons why the city has been recognized by the state's Community Housing (GICH) program for its determination to provide decent, safe, and affordable housing and increased economic opportunities for citizens of the City of Valdosta.



“It is a great feeling when we can provide decent housing. I believe everyone should have a comfortable place to lay their head every night. As City Manager, it is my goal to make that happen,” said City Manager Mark Barber.

HUD also determines eligible neighborhoods for the CDBG Program reconstructions. In Valdosta, these areas consist of districts 1,2,3, and the small southern portion of district 4, known as revitalization areas.

Though providing residents with safe living conditions is the primary goal, the funds can also be utilized for infrastructure projects such as sidewalk and street paving, so long as the funds are used in the aforementioned approved revitalization zones.

As an effort to keep older homes from becoming substandard, in addition to demolishing and rebuilding homes, the city began the rehabilitation of houses several years ago.

“It is a great feeling when we can provide decent housing. I believe everyone should have a comfortable place to lay their head every night. As City Manager, it is my goal to make that happen,”



“We replace things like roofing or heating and air conditioning units. We have seen good results from that. It helps to keep a home that is not quite substandard but was heading in the direction from becoming dilapidated, said Barber.

The city recently held two ribbon-cutting ceremonies for newly constructed homes on Mills Street and East Ann Street.



Homeowner and program recipient, Syvrolia Robinson, describes the condition of her previous home by saying, “I had large holes in my bathroom roof, so when it would rain, it would cause water to pour into my home and flood down the hallway.” She had lived in that home for a total of twenty-seven years.

Delight filled her face as she officially cut the ribbon on her new home, which she plans to live in with her granddaughter.

Fellow program recipient Beatrice Dean also felt this joy as she celebrated this new chapter. “When I first walked through the front door, I thought it was a dream house,” said Dean.



To be eligible for the reconstruction home program, a homeowner must meet income eligibility, must reside in the home, and the home must be deemed unsafe for occupancy.

For more information, call the Neighborhood Development Division at 229-671-3617.



MAYOR'S MOTORCADE





Every year around Christmas time, the Mayor of Valdosta teams up with the Valdosta Fire Department (VFD) to collect donations for Mayor's Motorcade. This beloved tradition was established decades ago by the Georgia Municipal Association and former Georgia Governor Ernest Vandiver to make the holiday season memorable for persons with developmental disabilities and behavioral health needs.

"Facilities like these are both needed and appreciated in our community. Therefore, it is important to assist in any way possible. It is our chance as a community to give back where it is most needed," said Fire Chief Brian Boutwell.

Through its existence, the program has supplied more than 3,200 patients homed in mental health hospitals and facilities with Christmas gifts and, more importantly, holiday cheer. The program relies solely on the community's generosity to donate items such as toiletries, clothing for men and women, games, movies, and monetary donations.

Although many cities across Georgia will be participating in their own variation of the event, gifts collected in Valdosta will be delivered by VFD to the Parkwood Developmental Center. The city previously delivered all the collected donations to the Southwestern State Hospital in Thomasville. Still, after the facility shut down, Mayor John Gayle decided to take a more local approach.



"The holidays are about the community coming together to help one another, so we are thankful to Mayor Gayle for selecting a local facility. More than 100 patients reside at the Parkwood Center. They each deserve to have a great Christmas and a great quality of life," said current Valdosta Mayor Scott James Matheson.



**"I AM INCREDIBLY
EXCITED TO BE
THERE IN PERSON
THIS YEAR,
COVID WILLING. I
HAVE A
DAUGHTER WITH
A MENTAL
DISABILITY, SO
THIS MEANS THE
WORLD TO ME
TO BE ABLE TO
DO THIS."**

Due to the rise in positive COVID-19 cases last December, the city could not enter the facility to hand out gifts as in years past. Still, Mayor Matheson is hopeful of returning to in-person delivery this year. "I am incredibly excited to be there in person this year, COVID willing. I have a daughter with a mental disability, so this means the world to me to be able to do this," said Mayor Matheson.



WINTER EVENTS WITH MAIN STREET



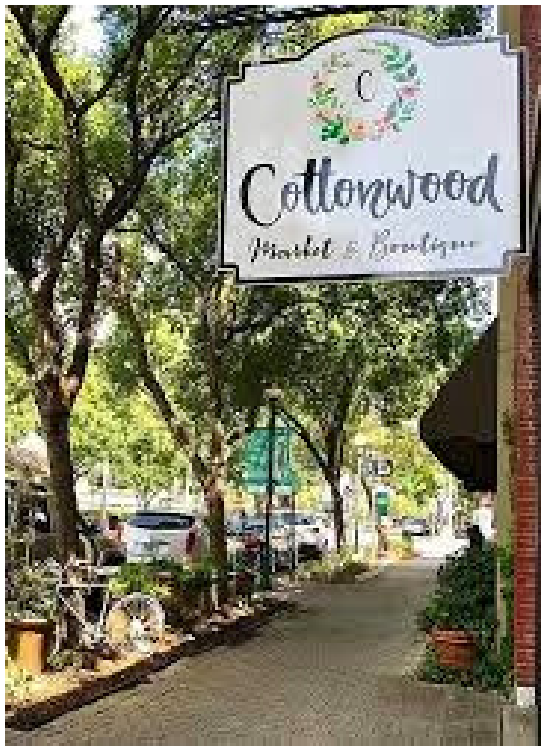
Downtown Valdosta is home to a variety of exceptional and local businesses. Whether you are looking for classic Southern cuisine with a contemporary flair, artfully unique finds, or a fun night out on the town, main street is your best bet. And with the holiday season among us, downtown is about to get even more electrifying, thanks to the city's Main Street Division.

Every year around the holidays, Main Street hosts a surplus of events ranging from Small Business Saturday to the beloved Christmas Parade. Their goal is to provide residents with family-friendly fun and highlight the many amazing locally owned businesses. "Around the holidays' people are looking for things to do with their families. Even more important for us is to get people downtown so they can see everything we have to offer because, at the end of the day, downtown is nothing without our small businesses," said Main Street Program Coordinator Rachel Thrasher.

There are many benefits to supporting these local shops and restaurants. Not only do they provide an utterly incomparable experience, but they also serve as an economic booster in our city. Unlike big box stores, when you shop with a local business the majority of those funds stay within the community. Local business owners are more likely to utilize local banks. They pay their employees who live in the community and pay their rent and utilities to local entities. "When you spend money with a small business, the money doesn't go to some corporate office in another state. It stays in our community. So, we really do our best to get feet on the street and to get people to spend money with these guys," said Thrasher.

Store owners like Samantha Schreiber of Cottonwood Market & Boutique always look forward to participating in Main Street events. She especially enjoyed the new Witches Night Out and was sure to dress the part alongside her employees. "It was a good twist on the classic Girls Night Out event and was well received. You could see the personality of everyone in their costumes. We look forward to seeing that event grow," said Schreiber. Schreiber believes that these events drive business and help bring residents from all demographics and interest levels to the downtown area.





In addition to Main Street events, the store keeps its schedule full of fun activities. "We have an event here or at one of our partner companies like Georgia Beer Company or Jessie's Restaurant at least once, if not twice a week," said Schreiber. Check out <https://www.cottonwoodmarket.net> for a complete list of their upcoming events.

Winter events start in November and run through mid-December. Typically, Valdosta Main Street kicks off winter events with a Holiday Open House, where local businesses showcase their new holiday collections. The season ends on a high note with the classic Girls Night Out event, with an extra special holiday theme this year. Be sure to check out the full itinerary of winter events below and follow Downtown Valdosta Main Street on social media for full event details.



Holiday Events



11/07

Holiday Open House



11/27

Small Business Saturday



12/03

First Friday Holiday Edition



12/03

Christmas Tree Lighting



12/03

Pop-Up Market

Holiday Events



12/03

Holiday Movie Showing



12/04

Kids Craft on the Lawn



12/04

Christmas 5k



12/04

Christmas Parade



12/11

Maker's Market Holiday Edition

MEET OUR PUBLIC INFORMATION TEAM



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STAY INFORMED



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There is a possibility your suggestion can be featured in our next issue!

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