

The Peachtree City City Council met Wednesday July 31 for the second day of a two-day retreat beginning at 9 a.m. at Suwanee City Hall. Present were Mayor Kim Learnard, Mayor Pro Tem Frank Destadio, Council Members Suzanne Brown, Clinton Holland, and Laura Johnson, along with Interim City Manager Justin Strickland and Interim Assistant City Manager Yasmin Julio. Also present were Administrative Assistant Hannah Thomas and Recording Secretary Martha Barksdale.

Facilitator Suzette Arnold said they would continue with their discussion of opportunities, threats, and weaknesses in Peachtree City as they related to a potential strategic plan.

Firstly, Strickland and Council went over what was on the agenda for that week's Council meeting.

Next, they returned to their list of priorities, noting that three Council members mentioned the need for an annexation, or growth boundary, study. Brown said she thought it should be more of a policy than a specific plan, because they did not want to tip off property speculators that certain parcels could be annexed. They all agreed that input from the City Attorney and the Planning Director were needed before moving ahead.

Next, they moved on to the topic of allowing backyard hens in certain residential zonings. Learnard said she could support that. It had been one of Brown's pet projects, and they decided to move ahead and look at ordinances in other cities.

Increasing the property tax homestead exemption for lower income seniors was another item on the priority list, and Brown said Strickland had told her that 80 senior citizens took advantage of that in 2023. The current requirements were a household income of \$30,000 or less in order to remove \$5,000 from the assessed value, resulting in a \$40 savings. They decided the \$30,000 would be about \$45,000 in adjusted income and had looked at raising the income limits to \$50,000 or \$55,000 in order to take care of things for a few years into the future.

This was a way to help this demographic with an insignificant impact to the budget, Strickland said. If they took \$15,000 off the assessed value, Brown reported, it would reduce a tax bill by \$150. Council said they could support this but wanted more information.

Johnson then mentioned a need for path connectivity down the west side of SR 74 South. Learnard suggested they ask GDOT about the feasibility of a path instead of a sidewalk in that area. They began to talk about paths in other areas, and Strickland said this was something that could come before the Transportation Advisory Group.

Holland thought the Comprehensive Plan should be tweaked every year, as they did in some cities. Destadio then asked about why the plan designated villages that were not villages, such as Lexington Village. Strickland said the villages had not changed, but there were Braelinn and Kedron villages each had two village centers. Learnard said Lexington was not a village; it was a village center.

Brown and Holland then expressed dissatisfaction with the Comprehensive Plan approved in 2022, saying the citizen surveys were not structured correctly and the process felt rushed.

Learnard felt they should leave it alone; there would be another update in 2027. Destadio said he, too, was not happy with the process, but agreed with the Mayor that it was done, and they should leave it alone now. Learnard said staff members had been harassed, even through the newspapers, and it was an embarrassment.

Holland remarked that all he wanted was a more statistically significant gathering of data. He said it was not a statistically valid sample, but Learnard said it was, and she had the numbers. She again said she understood there were things they did not like, but it was two years ago.

Strickland said Holland might be talking about a short-term work plan, which was also for five years. It could be included in the Comp Plan, and Holland said that sounded like a good idea and maybe they should leave the Comp Plan alone.

Johnson weighed in, saying revamping the Comp Plan was not one of her priorities. She noted that Council would have to vote on any rezonings or policy changes in any case.

Learnard said her top priority was to learn what were healthy boundaries for Strickland. He said no one was intrusive about calling him during his off hours, and he did not mind calls if they were not excessive. He joked that he was more likely to contact one of them than vice versa.

Letting the alternate member of the Planning Commission vote when a regular member was absent was one of the Mayor's suggestions, and the other Council Members agreed.

Another idea was that Council Members should have the option to opt into the City health care plan. She said that might attract some younger candidates to run for office. The group said they did not need the insurance but could see where others might and this would be an incentive.

She also reported that Fayetteville Mayor Ed Johnson had said they would be more likely to qualify for Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC) money if they had a regional path/trail plan.

Did they want to talk about eliminating runoffs and going to a popular vote system? Learnard asked, saying runoffs were expensive. Could they move it from 50% to 45%, Brown asked, but Julio said that was not allowed by State law.

Brown and Holland said they could not support eliminating runoffs, while Johnson said she needed more information. Julio pointed out that typically the highest vote getter from the General Election won in a runoff. The 2023 runoffs cost \$32,000, she said. Destadio said he needed more information but would support what the majority wanted. Strickland said he would get back to them with more information.

Regarding the Crabapple Lane closing controversy, Learnard said Tyrone Mayor Eric Dial, who used to be a representative to the ARC board, had told her they were not guaranteed the \$1.7 in transportation improvement plan money even if their engineers requested it. ARC funding was discretionary.

Destadio said he was not on board with a unified development ordinance (UDO) done by an outside contractor, but he did want to hear from Planning Commission Chairman Scott Ritenour and Vice Chair Kenneth Hamner and give them direction. He also stated he did not want another overlay district for SR 54. Holland stated they had to watch what came out of the Planning Commission, but he was willing to hear them out.

The Battery Way restrooms were a priority of Johnson's. Strickland advised that Battery Way would be covered in the Recreation Master Plan.

Discussion then followed about why candy was not thrown at the Fourth of July parade, and Strickland said that was a decision of the Recreation staff that he questioned, but he thought they could try it. It was a safety issue, but Johnson said people complained that the parade was boring. Holland asked why there was no school band, and Julio said they tried to get one or even hire a band, but it was not possible.

Strickland said there were complaints about too many political vehicles and floats in the parade, but he was not going to do anything about that because of First Amendment issues. Julio said the complaints she saw on social media said it took the focus away from the Fourth of July. Thomas spoke up and said there were also complaints about parade entries that were more advertisements than celebrations of the Fourth.

After a lunch break, the group reconvened. Holland said he really wanted a SR 54 corridor study with leaders from Coweta County, Peachtree City, and perhaps Tyrone involved. He had an upcoming meeting with GDOT and intended to discuss it there.

Another issue was a pickleball venue, for which \$770,000 was earmarked in the 2023 SPLOST. Holland said they had to decide on a location, and Strickland said it would be covered in the Recreation Master Plan. The SPLOST called for a free facility. He mentioned that the Newnan Pickleball Association ran their facility, so maybe something similar could be done in Peachtree City. Johnson mentioned the Tennis Center, but someone else said pickleball and tennis did not mix.

Brown said she would like to see a cap on surplus revenue, or fund balance. Strickland asked if she meant they should have a minimum and maximum percentage? He said the Governmental Finance Officers Association recommended at least 30% in order to get the best interest rates on loans.

It just seemed like they were taxing current residents to pay for future projects, Brown continued. Learnard mentioned that the percentage was projected to go down in the next few years' budgets before leveling off. They discussed establishing a range, saying the number could be tweaked.

Strickland suggested a 20% range and mentioned 35% to 55%. He suggested they look at this next year when they knew more about the impact of House Bill 581, which dealt with capping home values.

Brown said she would like to extend the time for public comments at City Council meetings to three to four minutes each and also allow people to speak about items that were on that night's agenda.

Learnard said she felt three minutes was too long but was in favor of allowing agenda items to be addressed. Holland agreed about the agenda items and suggested two minutes. Destadio said three minutes and was in favor of allowing agenda items, and Johnson agreed.

Julio said they could move public comments to the next item on the agenda after the moment of silence. Holland mentioned limiting comments to Peachtree City residents, but the others said that would be difficult.

The group decided to change the ordinance to allow for comments of no more than three minutes and to allow agenda items to be addressed. Public comment would be at the top of the agenda.

Next, they went over other items on the opportunities list. Strickland mentioned a housing study; Learnard said that was her item but it could come off. Holland suggested they leave it but make it a low priority. Maybe it could be part of a broader study, Strickland said.

They also discussed a partnership with Southern Conservation Trust for \$4,000 a year, which everyone agreed was a bargain.

Holland and Learnard were united in support of a Tree Commission and having Peachtree City designated as a Tree City. All of this could help them obtain grant money in the future. They decided to back off right now, but it still would be a goal.

Going back to the strategic plan, Arnold cautioned them not to let it fall off the table. She explained they needed to set timelines and establish who would be responsible for keeping it moving forward.

Another project they decided to move ahead on was the border study, but Learnard pointed out it was not budgeted. Again, they said input from the City Attorney and Planning Director was needed, and Strickland suggested

they have a proposal by the end of October with an eye towards getting a plan completed during fiscal year 2025.

Continuing with the timeline discussion, a backyard hen ordinance could be ready for Council deliberation in about six months, it was decided. They first needed to decide on a short-term rental ordinance and the administrative variance ordinance. January 25 was mentioned as a date for the poultry.

Staff would need to consult with the City Attorney about the steps needed to get legislation introduced to change the senior homestead exemption. The final ordinance should go to the legislative delegation by December of this year in order to hold a referendum in November 2025.

Council decided that the Transportation Advisory Group would look at path connectivity issues, including SR 74 South. GDOT would have to be involved. The group should be in place by September, Strickland stated.

The Comp Plan would be left alone since an update was set to be done during 2026. Learnard suggested their focus be on identifying who they wanted to be as a city.

Also on the table was implementing the findings of the Recreation Master Plan.

They said citizens should be informing them on the strategic plan. Brown cautioned that she did not want them to make a list and then have it just appear on a budget. Encouraging industrial and commercial growth was important to Holland.

Julio advised them not to be fearful about costs when setting goals. Staff would share information about the costs. Johnson pointed out that they could issue bonds to spread costs to future years.

This was where vision came into play, the Mayor observed, and Johnson and Holland both remarked that they needed vision about what citizens wanted. Brown, too, said feedback from citizens was important, and Julio mentioned maintaining strategic priorities with an eye towards the Five Pillars they had established. Learnard suggested they get familiar with strategic plans for other cities.

They would need to start vetting consultants, but when? Learnard said wait until the new calendar year.

Brown remarked that some things would have to wait. Johnson said they could have both their wants and their needs, mentioning an aquatics center. Holland stated he hoped the strategic plan could focus on attracting businesses.

In summarizing their achievements during the retreat, Arnold said they had worked through some difficult topics, and she again reminded them to remember that everyone saw things with their own unique perspective.

Strickland noted that four new citizen committees would be starting up in the coming year. Council decided to hold a retreat locally in January to include the executive leadership team and maybe another Council retreat in August 2025. The retreat adjourned at 4 p.m.

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Martha Barksdale, Recording Secretary

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Kim Learnard, Mayor

