CITY OF LAVONIA COUNCIL

REGULAR MEETING – MINUTES

September 8, 2026

5:30 PM

Present: Mayor Courtney Umbehant
Councilman – Eddie Floyd
Councilman – Michael Schulman
Councilman - Jeremy Madden
Councilman - Andrew Murphy

Attorney: Jay Doss

Media: M. J. Kneiser– WLHR
Charlie Eavenson – Franklin County Citizen Leader

Staff: City Manager - Robert Ogburn
Interim City Clerk – Barbara Busby
Police Chief – Shane Edmisten
DDA Director – Ashley Umbehant

Item 1. **Call to Order**:
Mayor Umbehant called the meeting to order and welcomed everyone.

Item 2. **Invocation and Pledge of Alliance to the American flag:** led by Councilman Schulman.

Item 3. **Confirmation of a Quorum:**
Mayor Umbehant confirmed that all members were present, and a quorum was established.

Item 4. **Consent Agenda Items** & **Approval of Minutes:**
b) Approval of Minutes – August 3, 2026, Regular Meeting; August 20, 2026, Called Meeting

c) Acceptance of the August 2026 Financial Report as presented.

Motion to approve the consent agenda items was made by Councilman Schulman and seconded by Councilman Murphy. The motion carried unanimously.

Approval of the Amended September 2026 Agenda
Motion to approve the amended agenda to move Items 11-E and 11-F to fall under Item 4 and to add the consideration of a new vehicle purchase following the City Manager's Report was made by Councilman Floyd and seconded by Councilman Schulman. The motion carried unanimously.

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Item 5. **Legal:**

e) **Public** Hearing **and 1st READ: AX-2026-003 – Annexation: Michael Grizzle / Willie Ray Clemons – 387 Wright Street (±4.0 acres)**

Mayor Umbehant opened the public hearing for annexation application AX-2026-003, submitted by Michael Grizzle, applicant, and Willie Ray Clemons, property owner, requesting the annexation of approximately ±4.0 acres located at 387 Wright Street — identified as Franklin County Tax Parcel 062B 013 — into the corporate limits of the City of Lavonia.

No public comments were offered in favor or in opposition. Mayor Umbehant closed the public hearing and asked Mr. Grizzle to explain his plans for the property.

Mr. Grizzle stated his intention to develop the property with stick-built, affordable single-family residential homes with good curb appeal, laid out along a proper road.

The Planning & Zoning Commission recommended approval of both the annexation and the rezoning.

Motion to approve annexation application AX-2026-003, annexing Tax Parcel 062B 013 into the corporate limits of the City of Lavonia, was made by Councilman Madden and seconded by Councilman Schulman. The motion carried unanimously. (1st Read)

f) **Public Hearing and 1st READ: R-2026-006 – Rezoning: Michael Grizzle / Willie Ray Clemons – 387 Wright Street (±4.0 acres, Rural Residential to R-1B)**

Mayor Umbehant opened the public hearing for rezoning application R-2026-006, submitted by Michael Grizzle, applicant, and Willie Ray Clemons, property owner, requesting a rezoning of approximately ±4.0 acres at 387 Wright Street from Rural Residential (Franklin County Unified Development Code) to R-1B (Single-Family Residential District – High Density), Tax Parcel 062B 013. The Lavonia Planning & Zoning Commission recommended approval.

No public comments were offered. Mayor Umbehant closed the public hearing. The Council discussed the application in conjunction with the annexation above.

Motion to approve rezoning application R-2026-006, contingent upon annexation into the City of Lavonia, was made by Councilman Murphy and seconded by Councilman Floyd. The motion carried unanimously. (1st Read)

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Item 6. **Personnel – Appointment of City Clerk**

Mayor Umbehant noted that longtime City Clerk Angie Greer would be retiring after 40 years of dedicated service to the City of Lavonia. In light of her upcoming retirement, the Mayor recommended the appointment of Barbara Busby as City Clerk.

Motion to appoint Barbara Busby as City Clerk of the City of Lavonia was made by Councilman Andrew Murphy and seconded by Councilman Floyd. The motion carried unanimously.

Item 7. **Downtown Development Authority – Appointment of new board members**

Mayor Umbehant thanked outgoing DDA Board members Megan Woody and LaDonna Andrews for their service. He then announced that the Downtown Development Authority Board had recommended Carah Pulliam and Gene Williams as new board members. Both individuals were introduced to the Council and the audience.

Motion to appoint Carah Pulliam and Gene Williams to the Downtown Development Authority Board was made by Councilman Floyd and seconded by Councilman Schulman. The motion carried unanimously.

Item 8. **LMIG Gerrard Road Project Bid Acceptance**

City Manager Robert Ogburn reported that four bids were received for the Gerrard Road project. Stratton & Sons submitted the lowest bid at $208,000, with the next closest bid coming in at $246,000. Staff recommended awarding the bid to Stratton & Sons. Ogburn noted that the public would be informed via Facebook once a start date was confirmed.

Motion to accept the bid from Stratton & Sons for the Gerrard Road LMIG project was made by Councilman Schulman seconded by Councilman Murphy. The motion carried unanimously.

Item 9. **Wrights Creek Parking Area Deed to the City**

Mayor Umbehant introduced Ken Gary, the developer constructing townhomes adjacent to Springview Height Park. Mr. Gary offered to deed to the City the parking area he had paved, striped, and prepared next to the park, with the one condition that residents of his townhome development be permitted to use the lot as overflow parking. Mayor Umbehant confirmed that the arrangement had been correctly represented and praised the donation as an invaluable asset to the community.

Motion to accept the deed to the Wrights Creek parking area was made by Councilman Murphy and seconded by Councilman Floyd. The motion carried unanimously.

Item 10. **New Radios for the Fire Department**

City Manager Ogburn advised the Council that Franklin County is transitioning to a digital radio system, rendering the Fire Department's current analog radios incompatible. Staff recommended purchasing 4 vehicle radios with installation and 19 portable radios — with the remaining portables to be purchased in the next budget cycle — along with water- and fire-rated accessories, from Communications International at a total cost of

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$92,000. The radios carry a 3-year full replacement warranty, excluding damage by the department itself. Council was advised that Franklin County planned to begin system testing in October or November, making timely acquisition important for continued interoperability with county fire departments.

Motion to approve the purchase of new radios from Communications International for a total of $92,000 was made by Councilman Murphy and seconded by Councilman Schulman. The motion carried unanimously.

Item 11. **Replacing Lift Station located off Smith Road**

City Manager Ogburn presented the case for replacing the aging lift station located behind the former Waffle House site on Gerrard Road, describing it as the most problematic of the city's lift stations — one requiring significant overtime, weekend call-outs, and middle-of-the-night repairs. Two quotes were obtained. The lower quote of $89,000 used a pump that staff's engineering contact, Tim Chitwood, could find no supporting history or documentation for, and also used a plastic rather than stainless steel cabinet, leading staff to advise against it. The higher quote of $146,000 was recommended for its quality and expected longevity — with Ogburn noting a goal of the replacement lasting another 40 years. He added that once Council authorized the purchase, he intended to negotiate the price down from $146,000 through in-house work, though the cost would not exceed that figure.

Motion to approve the lift station replacement for a cost not to exceed $146,000 was made by Councilman Madden and seconded by Councilman Floyd. The motion carried unanimously.

Item 12. **Legal (continued):**

a. **New Alcohol License Application – The Drink Depot**

An application for a new alcohol license was presented from The Drink Depot under the Beverage Shop License classification previously approved by the Council.

Motion to approve the alcohol license application for The Drink Depot was made by Councilman Schulman and seconded by Councilman Floyd. The motion carried unanimously.

b. **PUBLIC HEARING & 1st READ: RR-26-004 Public Hearing and 1st READ: R-26-004 – Ponder Development, LLC / Douglas Whitlow Trust – Rezone Highway 17 (±20.0 acres, B-2 to R-1B)**

Mayor Umbehant opened the public hearing for application R-26-004, submitted by Ponder Development, LLC, applicant, and Douglas Whitlow, Trustee of the Douglas Whitlow Trust, property owner, requesting a rezoning of approximately ±20.0 acres from B-2 (Local Business District) to R-1B (Single-Family Residential

District – High Density) on Highway 17, consisting of a portion of Tax Parcel 053-179, for residential development.

John Constantino of Athens, GA, spoke on behalf of Ponder Development, expressing support for the application and acknowledging the conditions recommended by the Planning & Zoning Commission. He indicated that the developer agreed to comply with all of them, which included sidewalks with square curbing, street lamps, speed risers, green space with a playground or recreational area of approximately 2–3 lot sizes, a well-designed entrance with landscaping, an HOA to be established prior to final plat approval, 6–8 foot privacy fencing along I-85 and adjacent commercial properties, a 50-foot green buffer along the exterior perimeter, a centralized bus stop coordinated with the school system, and hardy or cement board siding on all homes.

Ed Fickey of Tiger, GA, spoke in favor of the development, describing the property behind Tractor Supply as a well-laid track that would be a real showcase for the community.

No speakers spoke in opposition. Mayor Umbehant closed the public hearing.

The Mayor noted that the City's planning director, Jerry Weitz, had recommended denial on the grounds that the request did not align with the comprehensive plan. The Planning & Zoning Commission, however, recommended approval with the stated conditions after deliberation at both its regular meeting and a subsequent work session.

During Council discussion, Councilman Murphy stated he sided with Jerry Weitz's recommendation, expressing concern that the Highway 17 corridor was a prime commercial location and that rezoning it to residential could create problems 20 to 30 years down the road. He noted the City has sufficient residentially zoned land and preferred keeping commercial areas commercial.

Motion to deny the rezoning request R-26-004 was made by Councilman Murphy and seconded by Councilman Floyd. The motion carried unanimously.

c. Public Hearing and 1st READ: R-2026-005 – Rezone: Ken Gary / Der Same, LLC – Cornog Rd (±13.60 acres, B-3 to R-1A)

Mayor Umbehant opened the public hearing for application R-2026-005, submitted by Ken Gary, applicant, and Der Same, LLC, property owner, requesting a rezoning of approximately ±13.60 acres from B-3 (Heavy Industrial District) to R-1A (Single-Family Residential District – Low Density) on Cornog Road, consisting of a portion of Tax Parcel 063-120, for residential development.

Two members of the public spoke. Mike Jones of Lavonia addressed the Council, acknowledging that progress and development were coming to the area — particularly around the Springview Height neighborhood — but expressing a

deep concern about gentrification and the displacement of long-term legacy residents. He asked that the Council and the developer be intentional about ensuring the community was included in, not pushed out by, development. He asked how the project would serve those families who had been in the neighborhood for 80 and 90 years. He stated he was speaking in opposition for the time being but made clear his concern was not with development per se, but with how it would include the existing community.

Linda Barnes of Lavonia, asked questions about the type and density of housing, whether the community would be gated or open, and raised concerns about the potential for rising property taxes to burden longtime residents. Staff clarified that the development would consist of approximately 52 or 53 single-family craftsman-style homes on the tract; the community would be open with no gates; and a small park and dog park were planned for the front of the property.

Mr. Gary then addressed the Council directly. He presented his development concept, noting that he had agreed to most of the Planning & Zoning Commission's conditions, but offered two exceptions he wanted to discuss. He proposed a "country road" design featuring ditches on both sides rather than curbs, gutters, and sidewalks within the subdivision, arguing that the land is flat, the style is consistent with the existing neighborhood, and the cost savings would help keep home prices down. He also requested that the fence requirement along the railroad be omitted, preferring to leave that decision to individual homeowners, and proposed the railroad-screening condition be dropped. He described his intent to build craftsman-style ranch homes of approximately 1,500 square feet and two-story homes up to 2,100 square feet, targeted at a price point below $300,000 to serve local working families and young people. He described a mandatory HOA with stringent yard maintenance and parking regulations, a street lighting district to be assigned to the City and paid by the HOA, and a monument entrance sign.

Mayor Umbehant closed the public hearing. The Planning & Zoning Commission recommended approval with conditions.

During Council discussion, Councilman Floyd noted the property is currently zoned heavy industrial and expressed the view that residential development is a better use. He acknowledged the neighborhood concerns but expressed optimism about the development's potential, agreeing with the no-curb country road design as consistent with the existing streetscape. Councilman Murphy expressed support for keeping costs down, noting that more affordable homes benefit local residents rather than only those relocating from out of state. Councilman Madden appreciated the developer's efforts to keep prices accessible, acknowledged the reality of rising construction costs, and suggested that adding more taxpaying residents to the area would likely spread the tax burden rather than increase it for existing neighbors.

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Motion to approve the rezoning request R-2026-005 as a 1st Read was made by Councilman Madden and seconded by Councilman Schulman. The motion carried unanimously. (1st Read)

d. Public Hearing and 1st READ: V-2026-002 – Variance: Ken Gary / Der Same, LLC – Side Setback Reduction, Cornog Rd

Mayor Umbehant opened the public hearing for variance application V-2026-002, filed by Ken Gary, applicant, and Der Same, LLC, property owner, requesting a variance to reduce the required 15-foot side setback in the R-1A district to 10 feet, on the ±13.60-acre tract on Cornog Road, Tax Parcel 063-120, per City of Lavonia Ordinance Text Amendment 25-03, Section 102-151(c)/Table 5-2.

No members of the public came forward to speak. Mayor Umbehant closed the public hearing. The Planning & Zoning Commission recommended approval of the variance.

Motion to approve variance application V-2026-002 was made by Councilman Schulman and seconded by Councilman Murphy. The motion carried unanimously. (1st Read)

Item 13. Mayor's Report:

Mayor Umbehant shared several updates. He reported attending the Mayor's Leadership Academy, a training program offered jointly by the Carl Vinson Institute at UGA and the Georgia Municipal Association, calling it the best training he had experienced in his 11 years as an elected official. He expressed that the lessons and goals reinforced there would be of real benefit to his leadership of Lavonia.

The Mayor also shared that he, along with Ashley and City Manager Robert Ogburn, attended the Georgia Downtown Association Conference and accepted an award for Best Downtown Promotion in the State of Georgia for the City's "Listen Up" videos. He gave special credit to Ashley for doing the heavy lifting behind the scenes.

Mayor Umbehant offered a sincere thank-you to the Lavonia Planning & Zoning Commission, noting with pride how far the commission has come in the seriousness and preparation it brings to its work. He specifically recognized Commission Chair Ben White, who was present at the meeting, and encouraged him to share the Council's appreciation with the full commission.

Finally, Mayor Umbehant read aloud a proclamation declaring Thursday, September 10, 2026, as Angie Greer Day in the City of Lavonia, in recognition of City Clerk Angela Greer's 40 years of faithful service. He invited the full community to attend a retirement celebration at the Depot from 4:00 to 6:00 PM on Thursday.

Item 14. **City Manager's Report:**

The City Manager reported that the City was selected to participate in a capstone program with the University of Georgia's Carl Vinson Institute, stemming from his completion of the Certified Public Management course. UGA students will engage with city staff and Council to gather information and help develop a strategic business plan for the City. Additional details were forthcoming as the program gets underway.

Item 15. **New Vehicle Purchase**

City Manager Ogburn presented a request to purchase a Ford F-350 with a utility body from Ed Murdock Ford, to be financed through Ford Capital Leasing on a 60-month term at approximately $1,833 per month, with a total purchase price of $89,350. The truck is needed to haul the City's recently acquired tractor, which is heavier than the equipment the current aging vehicle can reliably pull. The City has surplused five older vehicles to help offset the cost, though those sales are still pending.

Motion to approve the purchase of a Ford F-350 with utility body from Ed Murdock for a total of $89,350, financed through Ford Capital Leasing over 60 months, was made by Councilman Floyd and seconded by Councilman Murphy. The motion carried unanimously.

Item 16. **Final Comments:**

Charlie Evanson (Franklin County Citizen Leader) requested a clarification on whether the approval of Mr. Gary's subdivision rezone (R-2026-005) included the Planning & Zoning Commission's recommended conditions. It was confirmed that the 1st Read was approved without the specific conditions attached to the motion. The Mayor clarified that from a legal standpoint, the absence of conditions on the 1st Read does not preclude their inclusion at the time of adoption on the 2nd Read.

M.J. Kneiser (WLHR) asked if Michael Grizzle submitted a site plan for his annexation that was approved. It was clarified that he did not, and it would be addressed when he is ready to move forward with the project.

Item 17. **Adjourn:**

Mayor Umbehant adjourned the meeting at 6:42 P.M.

Upcoming Meetings:

September 22, 2026 – Work Session (If needed)
October 13, 2026 (Tuesday) – City of Lavonia – Regular Council Meeting @ 5:30 P.M.

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Courtney Umbehant, Mayor Barbara Busby, City Clerk

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