



APRIL 10, 2025 - 12:00 p.m. - WORKSHOP and CITY MANAGER'S BRIEFING
CITY GOVERNMENT
OFFICIAL PROCEEDINGS OF THE MAYOR AND ALDERMEN
SAVANNAH, GEORGIA

The work session and City Manager’s briefing was held at **12:06 p.m.**, in the SCCPSS Board of Education Room located at the Eli Whitney Administrative Complex, 2 Laura Avenue, Building G. **Mayor Johnson** called the meeting to order. **Alderman Purtee** offered a prayer.

PRESENT:

- Mayor Van R. Johnson, II, Presiding
- Alderwoman Carolyn H. Bell, At-Large, Post 1
- Alderwoman Alicia Miller Blakely, At-Large, Post 2
- Alderwoman Bernetta B. Lanier, District 1
- Alderman Detric Leggett, District 2
- Alderwoman Linda Wilder-Bryan, District 3 - Vice Chair
- Alderman Nick Palumbo, District 4 - Chairman
- Alderwoman Dr. Estella Edwards Shabazz, District 5 - Mayor Pro Tem
- Alderman Kurtis Purtee, District 6

ALSO, PRESENT:

- City Manager Jay Melder
- Chief of Staff Daphanie Williams
- City Attorney Bates Lovett
- Clerk of Council Mark Massey
- Interim Deputy Clerk of Council Gwendolyn Jones

Workshop Agenda Items

1. Recorder's Court Discussion

Mayor Johnson acknowledged the single item up for discussion--the proposal for the City of Savannah to withdraw from Recorders Court of Chatham County and start what could be known as Savannah Municipal Court. He stated that it is something that the council has been briefed about, and now, it is time to formally talk about it.

Mayor Johnson said he had been looking at this model for years and had certainly talked about it publicly for two years now. Under the direction of City Manager Melder and City Attorney

Lovett, city staff have been meeting with our county partners and recorders court staff to review the landscape and best practices in Georgia, and they are now ready to approach the council about moving forward in this process.

Mayor Johnson stated that we did not create the recorders court, and so, to be clear, we can not abolish the recorders court. He said the council can choose where to direct our funds and personnel. Mayor Johnson believes the Savannah Municipal Court is the best model for us moving forward. After providing some history of Recorders Court, Mayor Johnson stated that he thinks this form of court does not work for us anymore. He expressed moving to a municipal court model that will give us the tools, authority, and responsiveness to better align our judicial system, particularly around public safety, code and housing enforcement, and restorative justice.

Mayor Johnson said that every municipality in Chatham County except for Vernonburg and Savannah has a municipal court. This creates opportunities to expand our scope, if funded and structured correctly, to handle additional things and to have a holistic approach to community-based justice by strategically aligning our municipal court with our city departments. Mayor Johnson stated that justice should not be about revenue either. However, he believes that we can operate a Savannah Municipal Court at less cost, higher efficiency, and with less personnel. The fines and fees collected through a well-managed and structured court can be reinvested into local safety and community-based programs.

Mayor Johnson thanked the City Manager and City Attorney for leading the investigation on council's behalf and turned the discussion over to the City Manager and staff for the presentation.

City Manager Melder stated that the looking at the Recorders Court and its structure began when the city council placed the item on their vision board a year and a half ago. He introduced Interim Chief of Information and Public Affairs Joe Shearouse to make a presentation about the differences between recorders courts and municipal courts, what our court system looks like and what court systems in other places look like, and what opportunities (pros and cons) exist for making changes or staying the same.

After the presentation, Mayor Johnson took a moment to acknowledge the attendance of Chief Judge Huffman, Judge Harmon, and court administrative staff from Recorders Court.

Ald. Purtee stated that this is a tough conversation to have, and after being involved with the workings of recorders court for 20 years, he is very familiar with their jurisdiction and role. Instead of removing the City of Savannah from Recorders Court or discontinuing combined services, he stated we should try to figure out solutions to make this work. Ald. Purtee further expressed the problems that could arise from removing the City of Savannah from Recorders Court as follows:

- Losing the opportunity to hear some cases, i.e., domestic violence, that are currently heard in recorders court.
- Taking on the responsibility of liability and cost issues in connection with transporting and securing inmates.
- Staffing the court with officers when the police department is not fully staffed right now, so this is not good fiduciary responsibility of good government.

Ald. Purtee stated what he is most worried about taking away the community's right to vote for their judge over this court and relying on this governing body. He added that we have to have a separation of power and a checks and balances system. Ald. Purtee expressed he will not be voting to remove the City of Savannah from Recorders Court.

Ald. Miller Blakely posed several questions:

- What were the pros and cons of the six municipal courts in Chatham County?
- When was the recorders court established? (1925)
- Were the citizens allowed to vote on the amendment to create this court? (the Georgia General Assembly)
- Has the county said they want to dissolve this court? (No)

- Is the City of Savannah taking this on themselves? (Information gathered based on the city council's visioning session)

Ald. Miller Blakely stated she was not in favor of taking away the power from the people to have the opportunity to vote for who they want as the judge of the recorders court. It appeared to her that the city would be losing money as opposed to gaining money. She further stated she would vote to keep Recorders Court as is, and it is operating as it is supposed to based on the numbers and the amount of work they are doing.

Mayor Johnson expressed that some historical data regarding the court's self-sufficiency needs to be addressed as well. Chief Shearouse explained that last year the general fund had to subsidize the city's cost of recorders court in the amount of \$1.1 million. Mayor Johnson asked when you go into the general fund to pay for a function of the court, should it be taken care of by those that utilize the court. (Yes)

Ald. Purtee asked if we paid the county a per diem per inmate. (No, the cost is included in the negotiation and allocated from the Local Option Sales Tax between the City and County until 2030.)

Ald. Wilder Bryan stated that a lot of the cases we have in recorders court are traffic and petty crimes. One of the problems is bottlenecks caused by the cancellation of cases. She advised that we have to be mindful that citizens are in the middle and defendants' lives are on hold because of cancellations. Ald. Wilder Bryan asked how many judges does recorders court have. (Three elected and a slate of pro tem judges). She reiterated that people who want to go home to their families are being harmed when cases are being canceled and that we need to fix that.

Mayor Johnson also reiterated that this is one of the priorities of the visioning session because of the issues raised concerning code violations. Mayor Johnson said he talked with the Liberty City Community Association president, who stated they had cases that had been opened for five years. When things are not handled at the judicial level, it becomes an issue that goes around and around, and meanwhile, neighbors and individuals are dealing with these code violations. Mayor Johnson added that our municipal court judges could be elected but only by the residents of Savannah. He stated in this case, which is kind of unique, recorders court judges are elected countywide even by people of other municipalities that do not use the service.

Ald. Palumbo stated he understands there are some challenges and expected those challenges were going to be addressed. He has a lot of questions and believes they are good questions that the public needs to have answered that are relevant to the presentation:

- What are the differences in the misdemeanor cases between recorders court and municipal court? And define Rule Nisi. (City Attorney Lovett provided a detailed response.)
- Regarding staffing and implementation, who staffs the court, processors, etc.: would it be all on us or does the partnership continue? (The municipality)
- Do residents from other jurisdictions currently appear in recorders court for our cases? (It depends on the reason why they are there and/or which authority is issuing the citation.)
- Identifying two problems, which are the pro tem caseload and cost, have we considered adding more permanent judges to the recorder's court? How would the process work? Why do we have the pro tem judges? City Manager Melder responded by stating that adding another judge would probably need to be changed from the county charter level. Pro tem judges would be added as needed. He further noted that if a judge needs to take a day off, a pro tem judge would come in and hear a docket or two, depending on the day. Mayor Johnson also added that pro tem judges are appointed by the city council. We could operate municipal court with fewer staff, with greater efficiency and flexibility, and without some of the backlog.
- Are there any policies that have been passed that say the cost needs to be revenue neutral, or is that something we decided? (No)

Ald. Palumbo stated his own decision tree is that we have to address the challenges in their time and place and try to do them as fast and efficiently as possible. He further expressed that if that means reinventing the wheel or developing something new, let's just make sure we exhaust every other opportunity before we have to do that.

Ald. Bell stated she had not heard enough today to convince her it was time for a change. She asked Chief Shearouse to clarify the statement about the costs increasing significantly within the last year and what attributed to the increase. Chief Shearouse stated in years 2023 and 2024 there was a deficit from the City of Savannah's general fund contribution and fines collected. The propensity for community service attributed to the increase. Ald. Bell also asked could constituents of the city of Savannah and of the unincorporated Chatham County only vote for our elected judges. (It would require a legislative change). Before throwing in the towel or doing something different, Ald. Bell stated she would rather feel assured that we have taken the necessary steps to change or improve the structure that we have.

Ald. Miller Blakely asked the City Manager to clarify the statement regarding the ordering of community service versus fines. City Manager Melder stated that judges are making a judicial decision that, more often, instead of a fine or fee, the consequence would be community service. He explained that because the court administration is a necessary function of government, the City of Savannah will always pay for the court administration, whether or not the fines collected sustain it. Ald. Miller Blakely requested a copy of the complaints regarding recorders court.

Ald. Lanier stated that she knows there are some issues in the court that we all would like to see better. In terms of offering solutions, this is a heavy-handed approach. With the newly staffed judges and maybe new management, they may not have had enough time to look at the issues and have had an opportunity to offer management adjustments and system process changes. Ald. Lanier asked what determines whether a judge would be appointed or elected. (City Council would make that determination.) City Manager Melder responded that the court runs well, however, there are levels of improvement that need to be made and discussed about the runnings of the court. Ald. Lanier thanked City Manager Melder for the clarification and stated it sounds like the issues could be resolved with some tweaks in management.

Mayor Pro Tem Dr. Shabazz stated this is not a new subject matter and she believes the council is an aggressive council that is getting old matters taken care of. Her comments to the council were to let us keep this in front of us, not to lose sight of it. Let us make the improvements, and let's get it done. Mayor Pro Tem Dr. Shabazz stated she has not been a person who says let's get rid of something if we just need to improve some things.

Ald. Purtee expressed additional concerns regarding start-up costs and how the cost would impact the growth of our city. He further expressed that he does not think this is a good idea.

Mayor Johnson presented the final comments by providing the reasons for discussing recorders court. He stated ultimately, this is about equity, access, and accountability. Mayor Johnson thanked City Manager Melder, Chief Shearouse, and Ms. Donna Willingham for continuing to bring to council the issues discussed during their visioning session.

[2. Closed Executive Session Regarding Personnel, Real Estate, and Litigation](#)

No executive session was held.

[3. City Manager's Update](#)

There was no update.

There was no action taken during the Workshop. Mayor Johnson adjourned the meeting at 1:28p.m.

Mark Massey, Clerk of Council

Date Minutes Approved: _____

Signature: _____

The video recording of the Workshop can be found by copying and inserting the link below in your url:

<https://www.youtube.com/@cityofsavannah/videos>

