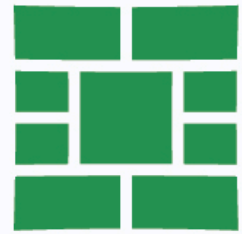


# SAVANNAH

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## JUNE 25, 2026 - 10:30 a.m. - WORKSHOP and CITY MANAGER'S BRIEFING CITY GOVERNMENT

### OFFICIAL PROCEEDINGS OF THE MAYOR AND ALDERMEN SAVANNAH, GEORGIA

The work session was held at **10:35 a.m.**, in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Floor Media Room. Mayor Johnson, called the meeting to order, then recognized Alderman Detric Leggett to offer a prayer.

#### PRESENT:

Mayor Van R. Johnson, II  
Alderwoman Alicia Miller Blakely, At-Large, Post 2  
Alderwoman Bernetta B. Lanier, District 1  
Alderman Detric Leggett, District 2  
Alderwoman Linda Wilder, 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

#### ABSENT:

Alderwoman Carolyn H. Bell, At-Large, Post 1

#### ALSO, PRESENT:

City Manager Jay Melder  
Assistant City Manager Taffanye Young  
Chief of Staff Daphanie Williams  
Deputy City Attorney Jennifer Herman  
Clerk of Council Mark Massey  
Deputy Clerk of Council Gwendolyn Jones

#### Workshop Agenda Items

[1. Presentation: Visit Savannah](#)

[1. Visit Savannah presentation 20260625.pdf](#)

City Manager Melder introduced Visit Savannah, which is a part of the Chamber of Commerce and is the City's destination marketing organization. They use hotel motel tax dollars to market Savannah as a visitor destination. City Manager Melder welcomed Joe Marinelli and his team

from Visit Savannah to present their presentation. Also present were Board Member Kelvin Moore and staff, and Savannah Area Chamber of Commerce President and CEO Bert Brantley.

Following the presentation, City Council members discussed and asked questions.

Mayor Johnson thanked Mr. Marinelli for the presentation and for the work that Visit Savannah does. He stated that he was continually impressed by the work. Mayor Johnson mentioned the "life cycle" presented in the presentation and stated that ours is a little different. He stated that for us, we build a place where people want to live and then a place they want to work. We start with the lived experience because if it is a place people want to live, then people want to visit. People want to visit, people want to build business here.

Ald. Palumbo stated that Visit Savannah is fantastic and phenomenal at what they do. He expressed that he wanted to better understand the governance structure and policymaking because what Visit Savannah does is an incredibly powerful and profound tool in shaping our economy. Ald. Palumbo asked where the governance and accountability comes from on our end, and how we fit into that structure. Mr. Marinelli responded. Ald. Palumbo thanked Mr. Marinelli for the clarification. He stated he thinks we all need a better delineation of those responsibilities and a better sense of understanding of how that happens. He further explained by saying, "How we market the number versus the number of visitors that we get, how long they stay, or the destinations that they have, does shape the number of hotels that we will see in the community and the expansion of these districts. So, somewhere those decisions are being made, and we are having to play catch-up." Ald. Palumbo explained that as representatives of this community, they are the ones who receive the complaints. He stated from this discussion he wanted to better understand where that policy is being made, how we structure our GPS, our strategic alignment, to make sure that we are leading for this community, shaping that policy and our projection forward, and what the budget is for it. Mr. Marinelli responded.

Mayor Johnson commented on the remarks regarding the Savannah Rock and Roll Marathon. He stated that the council decided that we were not going to do it anymore. Mayor Johnson stated that the marathon was not working for us anymore, and although it was still a pretty good money-making event, we prioritize our residents. He stated he does not think we will have any large marathons like that, and he thinks that Savannah, being so compact and dense, could do better with 5Ks and halves.

Mayor Pro Tem Dr. Shabazz thanked Visit Savannah and the Savannah Chamber of Commerce for all the years that they have been doing this work deliberately and intentionally for the City of Savannah--taking our city and presenting it to the world. Mayor Pro Tem Dr. Shabazz also thanked Visit Savannah for reminding the council how money comes into our city. She amplified that 40% of the money raised through SPLOST comes from our visitors. Mayor Pro Tem Dr. Shabazz also referenced the visitor demographics and race. She stated she was glad that the percentage of African-American visitors, along with the other races, had increased. Mayor Pro Tem Dr. Shabazz expressed how she would like for Visit Savannah to continue to have the numbers of our demographics increase by coming to our wonderful city because there is history that the world needs to see in our city.

Ald. Leggett asked how the role of transportation, primarily public transit, plays in outside advertising and attracting people to come to Savannah. Mr. Marinelli responded.

Mayor Johnson stated that when he got elected and took office in January 2020, he became "Mayor of Tourism", and soon after, he made it no secret that he was the biggest ambassador for the city. He stated that he understands that it is all about marketing, and then asked what Visit Savannah's annual budget was. (A tad over \$19M.) Mayor Johnson referenced a time (during Mayor O. Johnson's tenure) when Visit Savannah presented to the council some advertisements, and the council had a fit because it was not a representative of the community. He stated that Visit Savannah took that lesson, the feedback, really well, and your marketing has now reflected that, and he hopes that we could do that a little more because Savannah is a very diverse city. He further expressed that he thinks it is sometimes not portrayed as a diverse city, and when people come here, they are surprised--"They are like, 'Oh, I did not know Savannah was as diverse.'" Mayor Johnson stated that we have a part of GPS, a commitment to equity, and a burning question for him was that Visit Savannah would not necessarily be marketing

towards him--a non-sophisticated traveler who might stay shorter and who does not spend a lot of money because of the way his paycheck is set up. He asked how we are making sure that Savannah is not just for the rich and famous and the well-to-do. Mayor Johnson expressed that he struggles with the thought that we just want that high-end traveler, but he also wants those family reunions, church conferences, and fraternities, sororities, and masonic organizations to be able to come here and not say, "Well, I can't come to Savannah because it just costs too much." Mr. Marinelli responded.

Mayor Johnson mentioned that Savannah has become really big for "girl trips". He also mentioned how we used to have ambassadors. Mayor Johnson stated he thinks we could work together to create an ambassador program of individuals with eyes and ears to help keep people safe and also address issues of safety, security, and cleanliness.

Ald. Lanier asked if Visit Savannah was the destination marketing organization in Chatham County and if it was by state statute. City Manager Melder, Mayor Johnson, and Mr. Brantley responded. Ald. Lanier stated she represents the 1st District, and we love tourism because we love for people to come here to see what our ancestors have built. She stated that from her point of view, this is an area where there are a lot of discrepancies and inequity. Ald. Lanier stated, "You accomplish your goals," and "you are hitting your numbers." However, there are opportunities for destinations, opportunities for people to come to Savannah to stay and spend money to see what Savannah is all about. She stated we have so many engaged opportunities: the Weeping Time property, the Heritage Plantation, and the Cotton Gin -- what Eli Whitney was supposed to have invented. Ald. Lanier stated that when people like her get to this table and bring those forward, they do not get the support they need. She asked how does Visit Savannah work with the Black Chamber of Commerce. (Yes) Ald. Lanier stated that we want to make sure that we have an opportunity to work with the state going forward. She further stated that she has written letters and has been in contact with them about getting recognition for our assets here that we can leverage. Ald. Lanier stated she was sure Visit Savannah could help us with that. She also expressed that, based on the presentation, Visit Savannah is moving in the right direction, but there are just so many more opportunities that we are ignoring, and we have to do a better job at making sure we do this because it is going to benefit all of Savannah.

Ald. Miller Blakely asked how does the Black Chamber get its funding--is it directly given to them by our hotel motel tax? She stated the last time she heard that they got anything, it was \$50,000, and that was a couple of years ago. City Manager Melder responded. Ald. Miller Blakely noted that, as the City of Savannah, we are being generous to the Black Chamber of Commerce by giving them a grant. She asked how many years we have been giving them this grant. City Manager Melder stated he thinks we are in our third year, and it is an important partnership that we have with them. Mayor Johnson also replied by stating it is a partnership based on some of the things that came out of the R.E.A.L. Savannah report regarding engaging and growing black businesses. Ald. Miller Blakely stated that for us to do that type of work with them, and they are only getting \$50,000, she thinks we need to give them more.

Ald. Wilder stated public education is a draw too, and she would like to see more leaning in on activities for children. She stated that she talked to people who have children, and they want to come to a city that has family-friendly things too. Ald. Wilder thanked everyone for doing an amazing job.

Ald. Lanier mentioned the work of entertaining and planning for hotels in the Canal District. She stated she wanted to bring it up here because they are going to be in the hotel business in the 1st District a little bit more, and she wanted to make sure that it benefits the area and the District.

Mayor Johnson mentioned that Savannah would be hosting the Georgia Municipal Association's Annual Conference this weekend, and next year, Savannah will host the National Association of Counties' Annual Conference.

[2. Presentation: 2025 Year End Budget Closeout](#)

[2. 2025 Year End Budget Closeout-Audit presentation\\_20260625.pdf](#)

City Manager Melder introduced Mauldin & Jenkins Practice Leader, Partner, and Auditor Trey Scott to present the annual audit report. Financial Services Sr. Director David Maxwell was also present during the presentation.

Following the presentation, City Council members discussed and asked questions.

Mayor Johnson stated Mr. Scott indicated that Mauldin & Jenkins serves 750 municipal and county governments. He asked who was the largest (City of Atlanta), and are there 750 municipal and county governments in Georgia? (No, it is across the United States.) Mayor Johnson asked for Mr. Scott's opinion of the City of Savannah's financial health/statements as it relates to others. Mr. Scott replied.

Ald. Miller Blakely asked questions regarding the services provided by Mauldin & Jenkins. City Manager Melder explained the purpose of the service. Ald. Miller Blakely asked how much we are paying Mauldin & Jenkins to do this. (\$146,000)

Ald. Lanier referred to slide nine (9) of the presentation and made observations of the revenue and expenditures. She stated that in 2025, we got more revenue, but we spent quite a bit more, and she was looking at that in particular. City Manager Melder responded. Ald. Lanier also asked the City Manager to explain the "unassigned fund balances." The City Manager responded.

Mayor Johnson stated the goal of this was to make sure we have the receipts, and it is important to have someone independent, and that is experienced to be able to identify that. Mayor Johnson asked the City Manager to have his finance team stand, in which City Manager Melder recognized Senior Director of Financial Services and Chief Financial Officer David Maxwell and his entire team.

Ald. Wilder thanked Mr. Scott for his presentation and Mr. Maxwell and his team. She stated that we evidently must be doing something right. Ald. Wilder noted that we spent over \$100,000 to make sure that there was integrity, no corruption, or anything that was not in line with what we were supposed to be doing. She asked whether there was a recommendation. Mr. Scott responded.

[3. Presentation: 2026 Midyear Financial Update](#)

[3. 2026 Midyear Financial Update presentation 20260625.pdf](#)

City Manager Melder introduced Chief Budget Officer Melissa Carter to present the 2026 Midyear Financial Budget and Chief Financial Officer David Maxwell to present a presentation regarding the millage rate.

Following each presentation, City Council members discussed and asked questions.

Mayor Johnson stated we are fortunate that we are in a position to be cautious because there are some folks who are really alarmed right now. He stated his concern was that the aspects of the "Big Beautiful Bill" would start to hit, which would significantly shift responsibility from the federal government to states and local governments. Mayor Johnson exclaimed that this is a cause for alarm--that we try to create some way of being able to at least figure out what that means for us. He stated that this was going to be a crisis in our social service network that has not existed before, and we are going to probably be expected as a necessity to fill in the gap. Mayor Johnson stated he was just raising a flag for us to start looking at it.

Ald. Miller Blakely referred to slide eight (8) of the presentation and inquired about temp labor expenses. Ms. Carter explained. Ald. Miller Blakely noted she would like to further converse with the City Manager about temporary workers and full-time workers, especially within our sanitation department.

Mayor Pro Tem Dr. Shabazz asked Ms. Carter to explain what she meant by economic pressures in reference to slide six (6). Ms. Carter explained. Mayor Pro Tem Dr. Shabazz stated her next question was related to the next slide, general fund revenue, January through May. She asked how we could collect more money in reference to the items that were listed in red. City Manager Melder responded.

Ald. Lanier stated inflation is up, prices are up, people are spending less, sales tax is down, and our pension is healthy and at a stable rate. She asked whether we are nervous about our pension, whether we are looking for that to stay secure, or whether we are going to just watch the market on that. Ald. Palumbo (Vice Chair of the Pension Board) responded. Ald. Lanier stated that although we are in a cautionary phase, our pension is healthy. She also noted that property tax is up and sales tax is down. Ald. Lanier stated that it was interesting because we have people who were advocating to get rid of the property tax for sales tax, and had that been the case right now, we would be a little nervous about that movement with the sales tax being down. Ald. Lanier congratulated management for making a concerted effort to secure more grants and doing more work in the grant field. She stated let us continue to look at what we can do to increase the grants. Ald. Lanier asked the following questions:

- Is the Enmarket Arena an enterprise fund? (Yes)
- Leisure Services Fees have increased--is it because we have more activity? City Manager Melder responded.

Ald. Purtee asked the City Manager the following questions regarding school zone cameras

- Is revenue down? (Yes)
- What was the revenue for the year? (For the first five months, we have collected about \$390,000.)
- Where does the money go? (Public Safety)

Mayor Johnson stated that we always want to decrease our millage rate. He stated that if we cannot decrease it, then we do not want to raise it. Mayor Johnson further expressed that the council also does not want to put ourselves in a position of short-term gain and long-term hurt. He stated the worst thing you ever want to do is decrease a millage rate, and then have to raise it again the next year. Mayor Johnson stated we have done very well relying on the advice of our team in helping us to navigate this, and his only ask would be for the council to remember the history in this administration, we have/are,

- cut taxes twice.
- at the lowest (millage rate) since 1987.
- living within our means.
- living within our growth.
- given employees raises at every budget opportunity.

Mayor Johnson stated that a rainy day is coming, and we want to be prepared. He stated he thinks the City Manager's recommendation was solid.

Ald. Miller Blakely asked if we keep the millage rate at what we have now, would we not have those meetings? (We are required to do three public hearings and two readings of the ordinance.) She further asked that if we did the rollback rate, which would be 11.402, then we would not have to do those meetings. (Right) Ald. Miller Blakely mentioned Rockingham Farms did something phenomenal, and it added to our budget regarding payment in lieu of taxes. She further stated that the council needed to consider SCAD doing a payment in lieu of taxes. Mayor Johnson responded.

[4. Closed Execution Session: Litigation, Personnel, and Real Estate \(As Needed\)](#)

No Executive Session was held.

[5. City Manager's Update \(As Needed\)](#)

No City Manager Update was held.

Mayor Johnson asked members of the City Council if there was consensus to support the City Manager's recommendation to maintain the millage rate at 11.749 mils.

Hearing no objection, Mayor Johnson adjourned the workshop session at 1:35 p.m. No action was taken.

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>



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