



**MAY 22, 2025 - 10:30 a.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 **10:38 a.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
- Interim Deputy Clerk of Council Gwendolyn Jones
- Assistant to Clerk of Council Renee Osborne

**Workshop Agenda Items**

- [1. Westside Surface Lot](#)
  - [Exhibit 1: Arena Surface Lot Presentation.pptx](#)

Mayor Johnson stated that the workshop was extended to discuss the Arena project/Westside parking lot and the Statagic Plan. City Manager Melder shared an extensive presentation about the Westside "Arena" Surface Lot Project along with recommendations. City Manager Melder concluded the presentation with three possible options for council to consider as well as a remaining project timeline.

City Attorney Lovett stated that the City has an obligation to finish the remediation with Georgia and a separate agreement with the U.S. EPA (Environmental Protection Agency). The PCB contaminant is governed by the Toxic Substance Control Act (federal mandate).

Mayor Johnson stated that there had been talk in 2024 to condemn the project and council decided not to go forward in that direction.

City Attorney Lovett stated that the initial appraisal came in at about \$10M. The (property owner) Tennenbaum family came back with an appraisal of \$30M. He was instructed not to go forward with eminent domain (eminent domain is the power of the government to seize private property for public use, requiring just compensation to the property owner). Attorney Lovett stated that they could use the information to negotiate better terms on the lease.

The Mayor stated that in 2016 the discussions surrounding the project focused on the need to have the arena in that spot. The Mayor stated that the lot was contaminated and they were able to move the contaminants to a location behind Carver Village. This was an opportunity to provide an economic driver to the area and provide community/structural benefits. The Mayor also stated that some communities have existed near these industrial areas for many years and now the opportunity was available for us to clean it up. Mayor Johnson thanked City Manager Melder and City Attorney Lovett for keeping council involved and informed of the progression of the project.

Ald. Palumbo thanked City Manager Melder for the presentation and the background. Ald. Palumbo asked why more parking was needed at the Arena. City Manager Melder explained the reasons behind the demand for the parking, supplemental uses, and remediation obligations.

Ald. Palumbo asked the number of times the existing lot has been fully utilized in the last year. Ald. Palumbo stated that are other uses besides a parking lot. By letting land be land and remediating the site is a win. He and the other aldermen are committed to cleaning up the site. Surface parking lot or an open space might be desireable in a flood plain. Ald. Palumbo also stated that he appreciates having current options as those were not presented before. He addressed the fiscal prudence of the project and wanted to learn more about the revenue demand model that was generated for the parking lot. He asked about the origination of the figures (from Parking & Mobility). We cannot predict 30 years into the future and whether the revenue demand model will hold up. He stated that we still do not have an east-west mobility connection (alternative method of transportation). Hired experts suggested that we be extremely judicious about building more surface parking lots because it could evaporate tomorrow. Ald. Palumbo lastly stated that we need a better understanding of Cohen Road. He also asked if this contract is going to be approved by council shouldn't we first see the design, especially for such a large expenditure.

Ald. Bell asked Mayor Johnson and Mayor Pro Tem Dr. Shabazz about creating a shuttle service so that the downtown and surrounding parking areas could be taken into account.

Mayor Johnson stated that Ald. Bell was correct but that the parking for the Arena would be self-contained and would not spill into the community. The original goal was that whatever the Arena was hosting would be limited to onsite. However, as technology advanced, a bus and other various mobility options could be routed through as well.

Mayor Pro Tem Dr. Shabazz added that shuttle services from the Civic Center could provide additional mobility options. She stated that Cohen Street was a part of the history of African American Savannah. It is an important area that would provide the connectivity of walking, bike trails, and vehicles to get from the Boundary Street area and other areas to the southside.

Ald. Miller Blakely asked City Attorney Lovett why that property was not subjected to eminent domain. Attorney Lovett stated that in February/March 2024, rather than go through a trial they made the fiscal decision to rent and have a future council re-evaluate. She asked City Manager Melder for the amount that we would be giving to the (owners/Tennenbaum family) for the next 25 years.

Ald. Purtee stated that he noticed a lack of sufficient parking for disabled persons. It is an extreme hike for those persons to go from the parking area to the actual Arena. His concern is how it can be made equitable for everyone. He agrees with Ald. Palumbo in reference to

needing that walkability factor. Ald. Purtee noted that we are in the position to allocate the funds but he stated that we have to think in terms of the bigger picture. He stated, let's think of what's needed versus what's required. We need to think outside the box and look at people's experiences. He invited any staff member to stand outside the Arena to look at the overall experience as people come in. Ald. Purtee spoke to a lady that wished that handicapped spaces were closer or that there were more of them. He stated that we have to think of what is right.

Mayor Johnson stated that if we were to provide more parking in general then we would be able to provide more spaces for those that are mobility challenged.

Ald. Wilder-Bryan thanked City Manager Melder for his presentation. She stated that those types of businesses always end up in the low-income communities. From an environmental aspect, industrial plants and manufacturing facilities can cause problems with our livers, lymphatic systems, and cancer. Ald. Wilder-Bryan asked Attorney Lovett to go over the remediation compliance information because we cannot unring this bell. She stated that major companies wanted to come here but will not come due to inadequate parking/seating. She also stated that council wants to find the best avenue for all. She stated the importance of protecting the land and the water. To not do anything other than to remediate or to not remove the contaminants would be a disservice to the community. She asked if the project would hinder the mobility of the east-west connection. She also asked if the money used to fund the project would take away from any other projects in the budget that are already committed. The primary fight should be in removing the contaminated soil.

Ald. Lanier agreed that parking is needed for the Arena and Forsyth Park, Plant Riverside, plus two garages at Eastern Wharf. The need for parking is negatively impacting the residents in the surrounding areas and a constant reminder. She stated that when we talk about connectivity to the Arena from the westside, what does that look like. It is still complicit and we all have one vote. We have not done right by the people as this investment was supposed to uplift the people (and the people make the area).

Ald. Leggett spoke to some residents who wondered what was going on with the construction over at the Arena. They were elated because something is finally being done about it and they needed more parking. It would greatly reduce the spill over into the community and less quality of life issues. He asked the City Manager if we (the community tenants) would be liable if the contaminant was left uncapped. He also asked if continued talks with the Tennenbaum family was ongoing through this process. He asked if we are locked into a contract at this point (yes).

Ald. Purtee commented that if we decide to spend this much money, we need to take ownership in it. He agreed that we are under obligation to remediate however, we should take the property in any way possible so that we are no longer in a leasing situation.

Mayor Johnson stated he wants to make sure that we are all clear. This represents the city's largest municipal investment to date. Citizens had a variety of requests included that they wanted to be reconnected to the downtown area. The City made a promise that they would not allow the Arena interests to cross Stiles Avenue. Currently, we have an opportunity to put our own spin on things that are important to us.

## [2. 2025 Strategic Plan Update](#)

[Exhibit 1: 052225 Strategic Plan Update.pptx](#)

Mayor Johnson stated that he was excited to hear about the Strategic Plan.

City Manager Melder introduced Daphanie Williams Chief of Staff, who gave the presentation on the 2025 Strategic Plan Update and a walk-through of the city engagement processes.

City Council provided direction to City Manager Melder to perform a strategic planning process with the community.

The second part of the presentation was done by City Manager Melder on The Draft Strategic Plan Savannah GPS.

Mayor Johnson stated that we have to be very clear about the demographics - he knows the demographics of the City and the demographics of who responded to the survey. The staff have gone above and beyond to allow everyone the opportunity to weigh in and respond; from

the young to senior citizens from every district. The survey was kept open longer to allow people to engage. The goal was to make sure that this was representative of the community and not necessarily from those who responded. Mayor Johnson was interested in how close we were to the priorities in conjunction with the budget.

Ald. Wilder-Bryan asked what the median timeframe was within the budget that it takes to have the funds available. The public should know how long it takes to get from A to B in the budget process. She further stated that we should be mindful of the fact that capital projects may take up to 5 years and the project may not come to fruition because of that exact 5-year plan.

Ald. Palumbo asked City Manager Melder, what are your recommendations for cultural inclusivity, cultural arts, and performing arts (major touchstones to distribute much needed funds) within the budget? Recent news that the National Endowment for the Arts will be unable to provide funding to local organizations will be important for the city moving forward.

Mayor Johnson added there are cuts from the federal government all over the country. He asked if under the strategic plan there was an opportunity to talk about the prioritization of funding within the budget. There are things that we are required to provide and we should be judicious with taxes as well. We may see requests for funding that we typically did not fund in the past. "How do we get there?" The Mayor stated that there are some things that the City does not do; we legally have no responsibility, for example, issues of animal control or criminal prosecution. Mayor Johnson recommended opening a huge public opportunity via a portal for citizens to weigh in again on the draft before it is voted on.

Ald. Miller Blakely stated that the presentation specified that communities want more town hall meetings. She believed that if a town hall meeting was held the town/the city would show up and then we could focus on GPS.

Mayor Johnson stated that he is committed to doing two per year (Savannah At Night). We need to be sure that residents are very clear about the direction that we are putting our money.

Ald. Wilder-Bryan shared that the town hall meetings that Dr. Otis Johnson used to do were very effective. She suggested that a larger meeting could be held at the Civic Center (save wear and tear on the staff of team Savannah) and everyone would receive the information at the same time (Savannah After Hours). Ald. Wilder-Bryan stated that the 503+/- surveys that were completed (disappointing results) amongst all the districts were not an effective representation of participation. We have to do a better job because the people who really need the information never really get it.

Ald. Bell commended the City Manager, Daphanie Williams, and all of Team Savannah that put so much effort into this process. She stated that she could not remember a time when staff has been this thorough in reaching out to citizens from various backgrounds. The results may not show in the way we would have liked but she feels that the team has done a great job. We can only continue to demonstrate that we are reaching out to as many people as possible and they were provided an opportunity to respond and voice their opinion.

Ald. Lanier thought that it was an excellent presentation. This is a community benefit strategic approach that is citizen-led and resident-driven. She stated that her issue with the questionnaire was that it was leading and that may have led to reduced participation. More young people would engage if we could redesign the survey to have a push button style. Ald. Lanier stated that this validates the areas that we need to pay more attention to and that she has brought before council. She noted that we also need to do something about the slum lords. Ald. Lanier suggested that industrial intrusion with the issue of noise, congestion, and impacts on citizens lives could be shared at neighborhood meetings. She asked to add a field that indicated the resident's address and district that could help us identify where (map) the dollars are being spent. She stated that we are on track and she is appreciative.

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

Started at 1:39 p.m., FACILITATED by Mayor Johnson. Ald. Purtee moved to close the meeting for an Executive Session regarding Litigation and Personnel, seconded by Ald. Miller Blakely. The motion passed unanimously, 9-0-0. All City Council members were present. Staff were excused for the personnel discussion. The executive session was adjourned at 2:05 p.m.

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

There was no City Manager's Update.

There was no action taken. Mayor Johnson adjourned the workshop and executive session at 2:05 p.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>

