



OCTOBER 9, 2025 - 11:00 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 **11:02 p.m.** in the 2nd 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, 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
Assistant City Manager Taffanye Young
Chief of Staff Daphanie Williams
City Attorney Bates Lovett
Clerk of Council Mark Massey
Deputy Clerk of Council Gwendolyn Jones

Workshop Agenda Items

[1. Canal District Plan](#)

[CANAL DISTRICT PRESENTATION 10.09.2025.pdf](#)

City Manager Melder provided a brief overview of the Canal District tour for the community and Council Members. He introduced the Senior Director of Planning and Urban Design, Bridget Lidy, who presented the Canal District plan. Ms. Lidy also recognized staff members Zarina Davis, Akela Wright, and Savannah State University Intern Djorn "DJ" Barrett, Denise Grabowski with Symbiosky, and Michael Hightower with The Collaborative Firm.

Following the presentation, there were comments and questions from Council Members:

Mayor Johnson thanked the staff for the work and the presentation. He stated that we have so many things we are aggressively working on that we cannot make everything the first thing, and that this is now the right time to move forward with this (the Canal District plan). Mayor Johnson expressed that ultimately there will be changes; if the Council approves this, which he hoped.

Ald. Wilder-Bryan asked how much the process/playbook will cost. City Manager Melder responded. Ald. Wilder-Bryan stated she understood this was a great plan and asked where the money would come from and how it would impact the other districts. She stated that there are some investments she wanted to leave here, knowing that she created that legacy. Ald. Wilder-Bryan noted that the plans for the first district are going to come close to \$100 million, and the third district has not come close to that. She expressed that she would like a major investment within the next two years in the third district.

Mayor Johnson stated he wanted to provide some perspective and context regarding this plan. He stated this is a citywide and countywide project that is over twenty (20) years in the making, and we are just in the seats when it is coming into fruition. Some of you have been in the room twenty (20) years ago when we started talking about the possibilities of an arena. Many of you were sitting around when two (2) successful SPLOST referendums, in which county residents voted to put the arena in the location that the City ultimately decided. Mayor Johnson stated that we recognized that to value the arena would be to develop the arena district around it. He stated we have citywide assets and districts, but this is way bigger. This is not a new concept; this is just a vision coming into reality. Mayor Johnson expressed that, hopefully, council would see this as a regional investment.

Ald. Miller Blakely thanked Ms. Lidy and City Manager Melder for the tour and presentation. She stated this is a win-win for the whole community, the city, and the county. We have invested lots of money into the arena, and now, we need to go ahead and do what we need to do to make that canal district what it is supposed to be. Ald. Miller Blakely stated that her concern was the WaterWorks building. She stated she wanted to make sure the WaterWorks building would be a benefit for the people who live in and will be impacted in that area. Ald. Miller Blakely referenced the video in the presentation and stated that it might be old, but it is so significant as to what needs to happen in the canal district.

Ald. Bell stated she wanted to echo Ald. Miller Blakely comments regarding Ms. Lidy and staff. She stated she thought it was important to note the comments she made on the day of the tour. She was interested in and appreciated the fact that the community engagement from five years ago is very similar to what we are hearing today. Ald. Bell stated she was glad to know that the community was involved in this process and was still supporting it. She also thanked Ald. Lanier for all that she has done.

Ald. Palumbo stated it was a wonderful tour--to be able to see it as "common ground." It was a wonderful opportunity for our city and a model to be replicated when we have pressing challenges throughout our community and throughout the county. It (the tour) was a packed house, especially the facilitation afterwards and a for great discussion.

Mayor Pro Tem Dr. Shabazz stated that this is a good thing that we are now moving forward. She stated she was glad to see on today's agenda (October 9, 2025) what Ald. Lanier was concerned about--the sustainability of the WaterWorks building. Mayor Pro Tem Dr. Shabazz stated that she heard the community persons and Ald. Lanier's talks about the WaterWorks building, and Ald. Lanier was very concerned that the plat of her community/district stay exactly as they want. She stated that she believed that was what was happening on the agenda for today.

Ald. Lanier thanked the City Manager and his staff for the work they have done and are doing. She also thanked everyone who participated in the tour and stated that it was fun and that everyone had a good time. Ald. Lanier thanked Ms. Lidy for all of her work and stated that they have been at this for a really long time. She stated that Savannah is experiencing monumental growth, especially on the westside. There are some areas in Savannah that have been identified for being underinvested. Ald. Lanier stated that in the video, you saw the rice fields; those were rice plantations. So, our people have been in that area for some generations, and because of its

history, that area has been underinvested in and underdeveloped. Ald. Lanier further stated that even the federal government stepped in and said that we need to do something about these areas. So, we have three federal opportunity zones--one is in the third district and some in the second district that is in the opportunity zone. She further expressed that she is sure the City will be making some investments in those areas because we have identified those areas. The area on the southside, across from Armstrong, has been identified, and the area on the westside, where the canal district has also been identified.

Ald. Lanier stated she was excited because we are finally about to adopt this plan. She stated she has been one of those people who have been at the table for more than 20 years, looking for an investment in an underinvested area. Ald. Lanier stated she wanted to recognize Ms. Dorothy Pelote, Ms. Palmer, Ms. Newkirk, Mr. Dunham, Ms. Vera Wilson, and Mr. Victor Cooper, who are no longer with us, and Ms. Pam Oglesby and Ms. Dixon, who are still with us but are older now. They were at this for a long time, so, they would be happy today. She stated that we are ready to adopt the Canal District plan because of the development. Ald. Lanier expressed that we want smart and good growth and development. She stated that in her opinion, we have been leaning more towards the developers and accommodating developers than our residents and our local people. Ald. Lanier said that she thinks we have an opportunity here with our new city strategic plan and with these opportunities to really utilize this resident and citizen-led-driven approach. That is what we are doing here in this instance, and so that is good. Ald. Lanier stated that in this action playbook and in the plan, there is a place to do community benefit agreements. She stated that we have done a lot of work on that, and the reason she was pushing that was because of this activity, and we need more residents at the table.

Ald. Lanier stated that in the Canal District, the City owned several various large parcels of property, and that is why we took the tour. She stated that we (the tour participants) actually looked at and concentrated on the parcels that the City owned in the Canal District, what our (the City's) contribution could be, what it is, and where we (the City) are spending money in those areas. Ald. Lanier stated she looks forward to the tourism and hotel industries coming to the table. We have to anticipate all kinds of construction types to be coming into this district--hotel developments, multi-family housing developments, single-family housing developments.

Ald. Lanier further stated that because of what is happening here, we need to accomplish two goals: community upliftment and downtown expansion. She stated that she thought it was exciting that leaders and public administrators get to do these two things that often conflict. Ald. Lanier expressed that she is definitely committed to community upliftment because the investment was made--the public investment to attract private investment to uplift the community. She stated that we need to make sure there is a balance--that the downtown expansion does not overshadow the community upliftment, and vice versa, with the WaterWorks building. The WaterWorks building is going to serve the local neighborhoods and community, the downtown district, and tourists. Ald. Lanier stated lastly, this area with the canal district and the WaterWorks building is a historic and cultural asset, and she looks forward to having a Gullah Geechee imprint. She expressed that we have to take this cultural and historic asset and leverage it with programs, not only for the people who live there, but for tourists to come see what the local Gullah Geechee Savannah people are doing in that area and how they are expanding and expounding on their history. Ald. Lanier stated this is what we look forward to happening in that area. She stated that it is important to look at the implementation of the plan, and asked City Manager Melder and staff if we can come back, maybe in 60 days, with an implementation plan of how we are going to roll this out.

Mayor Johnson stated he wanted to take the opportunity to also lift some names: Ronald Williams and Francis Dunham. Mayor Johnson stated that, fortunately for us, we have not been one to sit on plans. He stated that he preferred us to do it now and move on it than to have done it five years ago and sit for five years because that is what builds some of the angst that we experience in some communities, that you have a plan and then other priorities come up. Mayor Johnson stated that he thought the council had adopted that when we are ready to move, we adopt the move.

City Manager Melder introduced Chief of Planning & Economic Development Faye DiMassimo, who provided a brief introduction of the Office of Sustainability Team: Nylah Oliver, Avni Naik, Joshua Corning, and Diksha Yede. The members of the Sustainability team presented the Citywide Facility Energy Efficiency Project.

Following the presentation, there were comments and questions from Council Members:

Ald. Miller Blakely asked if the public could just go and be a part of planting, learning how to plant, or what have you, so that they could possibly take it back to their communities. (The gardens are neighborhood-led, and the Office of Sustainability provides resources and support.) Ald. Miller Blakely stated she definitely wanted to know where the 12 community gardens were located and if there are any additional FEMA lots where we can put those community gardens. She stated that she saw in Australia that there was a main street where they just grow fruit and people can walk down the street and just pick the fruit off the tree, and stated she would like the staff to possibly think about getting back to something like that here in our city. Ald. Miller Blakely commended the staff for reducing the cost by \$116,500 dollars a year. She stated that we could take that money and do something else with it in another location, program, etc. Ald. Miller Blakey mentioned the ribbon cutting for Fire Station #12, and asked if they can tell the public where Fire Station #12 is located, in case they want to come out (to the ribbon cutting ceremony), they can. (Yes, 1205 Bradley Boulevard.)

Mayor Johnson stated he had a question for the City Manager and wanted to piggyback on Ald. Miller Blakely's question. He stated that the savings are on paper, but from an administrative standpoint, how are we able to encapsulate those savings and say, well, since we are not paying this amount here, we are able to repurpose this amount for something here. Mayor Johnson stated he thinks we have to be able to show the relationship of saying that something that does not exist now exists because we were able to use the money we saved. He further stated that he thinks it would be very helpful, particularly in the future budget years, to be able to say savings here, and this happened because of the savings. Mayor Johnson stated we have to figure out a way to codify that in a record. He expressed his thoughts about really finding ways of showing the relationships to actions on one end of the house affect the other end of the house in our strategic plan; e.g., savings here affects two new firefighters out there.

Mayor Pro Tem Dr. Shabazz asked if the City of Savannah has electric vehicle charging stations. (Yes, we have over 50 in the city, and over 40 of those are currently available to the public.) She also asked if there was a charge for using the station, or if it was free. (Currently, they are free, but we are looking at different options going forward with software that will be able to track the use and the kind of impacts of charging.) Mayor Pro Tem Dr. Shabazz stated that it would be another revenue fund source that we can use to help our citizens. She stated another thing she was impressed about was the partnership page and thanked the staff for the equitable flow out of the partners that is being used.

Ald. Wilder-Bryan expressed that she has a community garden that is on the FEMA lot on 58th and Costa Rica. She stated they are experiencing some irrigation and backing up over there, and asked if staff could send someone through there because it is creating a health problem--stagnant water. Ald. Wilder-Bryan stated she wanted the listening community, or anybody who is interested in doing community partnerships, to know that we were able to get some money from Home Depot. She stated that there are four elderly homes in her district, and they have wanted to do this type of garden, and asked if there was a way to partner with them and who they should call to ask about those. Ald. Wilder-Bryan stated we want to care for and keep our elderly babies busy, and gardening is one of the things that we have on our list to have sustainability in those areas.

Ald. Leggett stated that we have identified a couple of places in the second district. He stated he knows we do have some community gardens, but we are starting to re-institute some neighborhood associations. Ald. Leggett stated that we want to look into identifying some space for some more community gardens. He also asked if we are still maintaining the one on Gwinnett Street next to the entrepreneurial center (that was a previous grant with the Savannah Tree Foundation in partnership with the City of Savannah). He stated that the reason he was

asking because the seniors are asking for those grapefruits; so, if there is an opportunity someplace else, he can tell them where to get those trees or those grapefruits again.

Ald. Leggett asked City Manager Melder if he could talk about public-private partnerships when we talk about our EV opportunities. City Manager Melder responded. Ald. Leggett stated the reason why he asked is because he knows over at CAT we are talking about some city public private partnerships on the horizon when dealing with electric buses and different areas where we might be able to utilize space.

Ald. Lanier stated in the early 2000s, Mayor Otis Johnson and Mayor Edna Jackson were regulars coming to meetings on the westside because Hudson Hill was the only neighborhood with an environmental committee due to problems in the area with the environment. They were very instrumental in getting us hooked up with a lot of agencies out of Atlanta, some federal government agencies--the Harambee House did an excellent job as a partner. Ald. Lanier stated they went away from that and created the sustainability department based on all of the many activities that we were doing, and now, we are to do this 100% sustainability plan. She stated that the staff is doing great work that she respects a lot. Ald. Lanier further stated she has been talking to Gensler lately about smart cities. She expressed that they are looking at our area and would love to come and build a smart city, but we are competing with industrial and port development for the space. Now, Savannah has made a commitment to 100% sustainability and she would think that we would welcome organizations, such as Gensler, wanting to create sustainable development in our area that is more people-friendly than the environmental piece. Ald. Lanier stated she was excited about the work staff was doing, but when she left here today, she was going to meetings where residents would be talking about class action lawsuits. She stated she loved the work the staff is doing, and she looks forward to what is next, and she asked staff to please keep in mind what she said about what is happening over there (Hudson Hill down to Ogeechee and Tremont Park).

Mayor Johnson stated that even now, Harambee House continues to do work and actually gave a significant amount of money to the Hudson Hill community to continue to work with the things that we do not control. He stated that you know folks have the ability to seek legal redress, and we trust that they will for the things we do not control. Mayor Johnson stated that to that end, at the beginning of August, we were a part of announcing Georgia Bright Solar for All, which was important for him because it was going to provide free solar arrays to 800 families--free, no money ever, and Savannah was one of three or four cities; however, the Trump administration discontinued the program. Mayor Johnson stated we have to continue to push because equity is going to be where it is at--we can't get there unless everybody is able to get there.

Ald. Miller Blakely asked about the trees that were from the partnership between the Savannah Tree Foundation and the City. She stated she saw those trees, and they are dying. She asked if the community could go and get those trees if they could revitalize them, and what kind of trees they were. (If the community was interested, they could contact the Office of Sustainability.) Ald. Miller Blakely stated the trees look like they are in a dire situation, and if we can get them to some people who could plant them and save them, then we will give you a call and let you know.

Ald. Palumbo addressed the team by stating fantastic job, and it was wonderful to meet them, and they were a breath of fresh air. It is really great to see a young, energetic team at the helm and an office that has found its footing, and is headed in the right direction. He stated that the staff have what he believed to be one of the toughest jobs in the City because it is so comprehensive, but you have to be so lean and tactical at the same time. Ald. Palumbo stated that, as you have evidenced by this discussion, so many points that you could touch upon that encompass sustainability, resilience, and so much more. He further stated that the staff also carry the weight and the knowledge of what a precarious situation our City is in and the planet is in today. Ald. Palumbo stated he supports the staff, and he believed Council supports them too. He encouraged staff to continue to be evangelists to show that it saves money, it saves time, it is the smart thing to do, so that we can share with the other municipalities in Chatham County and beyond what an impact this can have together.

HELD. Mayor Johnson and Mayor Pro Tem Dr. Shabazz moved to hold an executive session regarding litigation and personnel, seconded by Ald. Palumbo. The motion passed unanimously, 9-0-0.

At 12:39 p.m., Mayor Johnson recessed the work session for the executive session to be held on the 4th Floor in the City Manager’s conference room, which began at 12:52 p.m. All members were present, except Ald. Purtee. Also attending were City Manager Jay Melder, City Attorney Bates Lovett joined with Mathew McCoy from McCorkle, Johnson & McCoy LLP, and Clerk of Council Mark Massey.

Ald. Palumbo moved to adjourn the executive session/workshop, seconded by Ald. Leggett. The motion passed unanimously, 8-0-0. Ald. Purtee was absent.

4. City Manager Updates

There was no City Manager's update held.

Mayor Johnson adjourned the workshop/executive session at 1:58 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>

