



SEPTEMBER 12, 2024 11:00 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 **11:04 a.m.**, in the SCCPSS Board of Education Room located at the Whitney Administrative Complex, 2 Laura Avenue, Building G. **Mayor Johnson** called the meeting to order, then recognized **Alderman Purtee** to offer a prayer.

Mayor Johnson acknowledged the day as being SAV/912 Day, he thanked the Public Board of Education and staff for allowing the city to utilize their space while City Hall is undergoing a six-month restoration project, and he advised that the previously advertised Show Cause Hearing will be continued/postponed to the October 10th City Council Meeting, as requested by the alcohol license holder Rajendra Patel of Octane Bar and Lounge located at 35 Whitaker Streeting in Aldermanic District 2.

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

Workshop Agenda Items

[1. The Front Porch Presentation](#)

City Manager Melder echoed Mayor Johnson's thanks and extended his thanks to School Board President Roger Moss, Superintendent Denise Watts and their entire team for assisting us and allowing us to utilize their space while City Hall is being restored. He thanked Todd Hagin and Ken Slats, the City Manager's office, Marketing and Communications, David Higdon, Information and Public Affairs office, and the City Clerk's office.

City Manager Melder announced we have a presentation from the Front Porch, a critical partner with the city and juvenile restorative justice.

Front Porch Director Danica Rubenstein introduced herself as the new director having moved from West Virginia, and she yielded to Shawnessy Cargile, Family Engagement and Activities Coordinator to make the presentation. Ms. Rubenstein handed out gift bags on behalf of the Front Porch.

Mr. Cargile stated they are located on Abercorn Street and they work with family and youth to get them connected to valuable services they need. They are under the umbrella of Juvenile Court System, started by the Juvenile Court Judges. They work with kids from all backgrounds and situations, unless they have been arrested and have pending charges or on probation. They were setup to be an early intervention and to be preventative. He presented a PowerPoint presentation. He concluded his presentation stating Ald. Bell helped to start the Front Porch.

Ald. Bell agreed she was involved and thanked the City of Savannah for its contributions early on by assisting with the facility on Abercorn, as we are a partner. She stated that Front Porch is one of the agencies in town that has the most partners participating in a collaborative form. It started like this and it remains this way, with sponsoring agencies paying the salaries.

Mayor Johnson thanked him for his presentation. He was around when this began, and this work was a major opportunity for young people who weren't necessarily involved yet, but they were heading there. And there were parents who said, I don't know what to do. This was probably one of the largest collaborations, since the Youth Futures Authority, in terms of having people involved and engaged. The City of Savannah remains with skin in the game, given space is a premium and we continue to offer our space. His concern then and now is that this is a countywide issue, and all municipalities need to have some skin in the game. While everyone cannot contribute space, it has been five years now and everybody can contribute something. With more support, the program can serve a whole lot more.

Ald. Miller Blakely asked how many children are serviced on a yearly basis (500 referrals resulting in 300 serviced, plus education and awareness events, back-to-school block rock and other community events like the clothing bank and work with other partners). Then she asked where the bulk of the children come from (Mostly Savannah, 31419, 31405 typically). Ald. Miller Blakely asked about the story behind the Katrina Woodley clothing closet (a former Front Porch employee who died from COVID).

Ald. Bell mentioned the three Juvenile Court Judges who were active five years ago, when the program started. She named Judge Lisa Colbert, Judge Leroy Burke, and Judge Tom Cole.

Mayor Pro Tem Dr. Shabazz stated she was there on the front lawn when they did the ribbon cutting, along with the Mayor and Ald. Bell. She thanked them for the continuation of this work, which we still need for our community, families and children. We also need the continued support from the County and all the municipalities to continue this great work.

Ald. Wilder-Bryan thanked them for their work, and Judge Roxanne Formey too. She asked if the services provided are income-based or a free service (driven income-based, in that everyone gets free service). She also attended the ribbon cutting. Then she asked in your tracking of five years, how long does a person stay in your program or the median time? Mr. Cargile responded ideally for at least 90 days of case management. Ald. Wilder-Bryan asked for the median age (10 years old for Boys, 11 years old for girls). Mr. Cargile stated they serve kids from 5-18 years old, as long as they can communicate in order to develop a case management plan. Ald. Wilder-Bryan asked if they service more boys than girls (yes). Ald. Wilder-Bryan stated she is seeing on social media a lot more girls fighting and being the cause of a lot more crime going on here. She asked if they ever get referrals from police officers. She would like the police officers to get a card with information for referrals when they see people in the community who are at-risk.

Ald. Bell stated the Police Department needed to be mentioned, who has had a presence on that board since its inception through Assistant Police Chief Robert Gavin. Mr. Cargile stated on average 1/5 of their referrals come from law enforcement.

Ald. Lanier stated she missed the presentation; however, she has been following the work of Judge Cole and the Front Porch. On the west side, zip code 31415, they have a huge juvenile at-risk problem. She is concerned that we do not see the zip codes where we know we have the most impacted youth. Mr. Cargile stated he is going off the top of this head with this information, but he will place this afternoon on their Facebook page a graphic to show year-to-dates with zip codes and referrals.

Mayor Johnson added that maybe Mr. Cargile did not misstate, given the services at the Front Porch is for persons who are currently not involved with the court system and people who proactively referred. We can ensure through our Marketing and Communications that the community at-large and parents know that this is a resource, in order to help get referrals up and prevent some of our numbers on the justice-involved piece.

Ald. Miller Blakely stated for the record she was at the ribbon-cutting also. She was concerned when Mr. Cargile said 31419, due to the gentrification within the city, we see more people moving to the southside.

Mayor Johnson thanked them for what they do, and stated they will have the City Manager and his team contact them to see how we can elevate our discussion about what's going on and how people can get involved and engaged.

[2. Savannah Industrial & Domestic \(I&D\) Water Treatment Plant](#)

City Manager Melder began the presentation stating decisions we make in the next four years are going to shape this community in really significant ways for the next 50-100 years, in the ways that those same decisions in the last 20 years never could. One of those areas of decision is regarding the water and sewer system, a surface water plant. EPD and EPA continue to restrict how much water anyone can pull out of the Floridian aquifer, especially here on the Savannah River because of the pressures put on that aquifer by industries up and down the river. So more and more we are relying on surface water to be the regional water supplier. Our plant at the industrial and domestic water treatment facility is that surface water for the region. Regional water has been in the news a lot lately, especially in regards to what is happening in North Bryan County and concerns in Statesboro. The City of Savannah as a regional supplier does not supply water in North Bryan County. Today's discussion is about what we need to do for our water treatment facility in the next 5-20 years to meet the current and future demand, to meet the needs of our rate payers, as well as to deal with the regulatory requirements that are going to be coming down and making huge new shifts in the way that we have to treat our water. Then he introduced to make a presentation Water Supply & Treatment Director Brian Shaw, Hussey Gay Bell Director of Water/Wastewater Chris Burke, and Associate Vice President & Mid-Atlantic South Area Director at Black & Veatch Jonathan Ladd.

Mayor Johnson thanked them for the presentation and began by saying "where there is no vision, people perish." We have seen examples around the country where people have kicked the can down the road and allowed things to be more costly, than if it was addressed sooner/before. For Council, this is an opportunity for us to look down the road and project. Water is foundational, necessary business, and the bane of our existence. Having accessible and safe water is a key to one of our brands. It's an enterprise. Mayor Johnson said it's going to cost, require real vision and investment, but he appreciates having the discussion. Having the discussion now makes life better for our children and our children's children.

Ald. Bell asked what is the projected timeline. City Manager Melder responded detailing slide #14 (Project Implementation Phases). Ald. Bell asked the City Manager to repeat and explain for the public the impact on the average taxpayer with respect to the water/sewer enterprise fund. City Manager Melder responded we have sources of water, ground water and surface water. We treat and convey our surface water to households and businesses. That water moves into our water and reclamation and sewage system. Every water and sewer user pays a bill. This is how we pay for our capital outlays and routine maintenance. These are not general fund dollars. We have used some SPLOST dollars in the past to help pay for our system, and we will seek federal and state grants to help pay as well. These expenses do not take away our ability to pay for new rec centers, new police and fire stations. This is an enterprise that pays for itself, as a utility. Regarding water/sewer being a foundational service, every civilization since the dawn of time has had to solve for water. You need water to live, and increasingly you need water to do anything. Good clean drinking water is available to Savannahians, large manufacturers and the city's fire department have gallons of water and necessary water pressure available to them. 40% of the City's ISO 1 rating is based on our water system, its pressure, and maintenance. It is the most important system we have in our city, in order for us to function everyday. This is needed for economic growth, as the consultants said. It is also about the residential growth, i.e., New Hampstead (9800 new homes), Highlands, those coming to western Chatham County, and lines needing to be upgraded within the central part of the city.

Ald. Miller Blakely thanked them for their presentation, and she asked them why the State is reducing the amount of water that we can use. Dr. Shaw responded that the State started reducing usage about 5-6 years ago, so this is a staged approach. The State gave him the reason being salt water intrusion (protecting the aquifer). Since the city has a surface plant, they want us to lean on that more to supply the water in the region. When the facility is upgraded, Ald. Miller Blakely asked what percentage will we need to increase the water bills to citizens. City Manager Melder responded rates will be based on what we need to do to upgrade the plant, and a study will come first for Council approval. Right now, we provide some of the cheapest water in the State of Georgia, almost ground water rates. Ground water which is what is being cutback from the aquifer, is relatively cheaper and easier to produce, versus surface water which requires the I&D plant. Rates will have to go up, but we want to do it very incrementally.

Mayor Johnson stated we don't want cheap, but less expensive.

Ald. Palumbo thanked everyone and he says we need a real plan to move this forward. What is the cost of us taking no action at this time? City Manager Melder responded we would have to stop the growth and reduce the pressure of the water. Dr. Shaw said we wouldn't be able to meet the demand.

Mayor Pro Tem Dr. Shabazz thanked everyone for bringing one of the most critical subjects forward that we need to talk about, water. It is mandatory that we continue to discuss this subject, in reference to taking care of our citizens. We have tremendous growth in our city and region. It is going to take 100s of millions of dollars to take care of the I&D water plant, by improving and upgrading it. They were ahead of their times in 1947 when they put that plant out there in the County on Hwy 21. When we are talking to our industrial customers, there should be no hesistancy in regards to paying higher rates. With all of the pressures on the system, everything presented needs to be done, and she is all in.

Ald. Wilder-Bryan stated she is very familiar with ground and surface water. With PFAS the forever chemical, what are you going to do different? She is concerned about the smell and what will be done differently. The new process did not quite hit the mark, and will we have a new filtration process. The City Attorney asked to get back with her regarding PFAS, given the resolution approved previously by the City Council to enter into litigation. He will have an update soon. Regarding the odor at the facility on Presidents Street, the City Manager responded this is a different part of the system, in this case before it gets flushed. He will get a report from Ron and Brian about what they are doing to lessen the odor.

Ald. Lanier spoke on need for this service. We want to make sure that the growth is not detrimental to the citizens already in-place paying for this fund. Will the use of impact fees assist us in this area? City Manager Melder responded we couldn't use water & sewer for impact fees because we are already using impact fees for this area. Upgrades are going to be paid from usage, especially the large industrial customers but the domestic customers as well. Given anticipated money coming, like a new ARPA, do we need to increase our grant writing? City Manager Melder responded we have been working on having the best grant capture system here, and he detailed recent grants received. They will continue to work in this area. We are the largest water provider in Southeast Georgia, Southeast GA is very popular, and we are seeing a lot of growth. He sees a very high probability for State and Federal grants to come down. Regarding the plant in Port Wentworth, is the footprint sufficient or do we need to purchase more? Mr. Ladd responded yes it is sufficient, as presented in the master plan. This is good governance, and we are playing catch-up with the infrastructure and conveyance. City Manager Melder responded yes, it will include the conveyance and capacity.

Mayor Johnson agreed wholeheartedly with Ald. Lanier. We have significantly upgraded our grant game, and increased our advocacy at the State and Federal levels, through the City Manager and Interim Chief Joe Shearouse. And we have seen results. They also want to see that we have skin in the game, by seeing a plan, and by seeing we are willing to put money into it. Good plans bring good money, as seen recently with the U.S. Transportation Secretary. He thanked the presenters again.

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

There was no executive session held.

[4. City Manager's Agenda Review](#)

There was no City Manager's review held.

There was no action taken during the Workshop.

Mayor Johnson adjourned the workshop at **12:31 p.m.**

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

<https://savannahgovtv.viebit.com/player.php?hash=BlhqwiVadzGpN5wH>

Mark Massey, Clerk of Council

Date Minutes Approved: _____

Signature: _____

