

MINUTES

City Council Strategic Planning Meeting Blue Ridge Energy Corporate Office February 28, 2025 8:00 A.M.

Facilitator: Anthony Starr, Western Piedmont Council of Government.

Participants: Mayor Joseph Gibbons, Mayor Pro-Tem David Stevens, Jonathan Beal, Todd Perdue, Ike Perkins, Ralph Prestwood, Kimmie Rogers and Crissy Thomas.

City Staff: City Manager Scott Hildebran, City Clerk Shirley Cannon, Finance Director Donna Bean, Fire Chief Norman Staines, Police Chief Brent Phelps, Main Street & Economic Development Director Brenda Floyd, Public Information Officer Joshua Harris, Planning Director Hannah Williams, Public Utilities Public Services Director Jeff Church, Public Services Public Works Director Jon Hogan, Recreation Director Phil Harper and Grants & Special Projects Director Jared Wright. Customer Service Design Team Members in attendance were Joshua Harris and Crystal McCurry.

Others in Attendance: Ashley Smith, Downtown Events Coordinator.

Call to Order

Mayor Gibbons welcomed everyone and called the meeting to order. He remarked this is a very important meeting for City Council due to Council establishing their priorities for FY2025-26. Mayor Gibbons thanked City Council for all of their hard work and pointed out Council's goal is to make great decisions for the City.

Mayor Gibbons introduced Anthony Starr, Western Piedmont Council of Governments, Facilitator of the session. Mr. Starr stated the purpose of the meeting is to prioritize projects for the year.

Mission Statement and Vision Statement Review

Mr. Starr asked Council for there were any changes and/or additions they would like to address in the City's Mission & Vision statements. City Council was in consensus to have the City's Mission Statement and Vision Statement remain the same.

The mission of the City of Lenoir is:

- to serve our citizens and the community by providing a clean, safe, healthy, and attractive living and business environment, through the efficient deliver of essential city services in a fiscally responsible and equitable manner.
- to identify, prioritize, plan, and act on opportunities for preserving and improving the quality of life of all of our citizens and community.

VISION FOR THE CITY OF LENOIR

We aspire to be the city of choice in western North Carolina for current and future generations—beautiful, clean and safe.

We will achieve our vision through:

- *a healthy economy*
- *strong businesses*
- *vital neighborhoods*
- *a vibrant downtown*
- *extensive recreational and cultural opportunities*

We will preserve Lenoir's friendly, small town atmosphere and celebrate the diversity of our people.

We require a city government that is:

- *accessible and engaged with the public*
- *accountable*
- *efficient and responsive*
- *an employer of choice*
- *forward thinking*
- *honest and ethical*
- *inclusive and equitable*
- *innovative and collaborative*
- *transparent*
- *fiscally responsible*

Customer Service Update

Joshua Harris and Crystal McCurry, Customer Service Design Team members, stated the City's Customer Service Program, which began in 2008, meets monthly to plan events and review activities. City employees gave out 30 Golden Ticket nominations to their coworkers in 2023. Golden Tickets are given to employees who go above and beyond to provide customer service. The Customer Service Design Team votes on quarterly winners, who receive a half day of paid time off (PTO). The annual winner is chosen as the most deserving winner and is awarded a day off with pay.

In addition, Crystal displayed the Customer Service Team's new logo and goals and reviewed the keys. She also stated they held 8 new hire orientations in 2023. The Customer Service Team also hosts 2 employee appreciation events including a lunch in the spring and dinner in the fall. The Team further organized the Employee Litter Sweep in which a number of city employees participated in. Also, the Team is assisting the Human Resources Department with restarting and hosting the Employee Service Awards event.

On behalf of the Design Team, Joshua and Crystal thanked City Council for all of their support.

Mayor Gibbons stated implementing the City's Customer Service Program was one of the best decisions the City has done. City Manager Hildebran stated the program is employee driven and he appreciates everyone's hard work.

State of the City Presentation – Mayor Gibbons/City Manager Hildebran

Mayor Gibbons and City Manager Hildebran reviewed a power point presentation "2024 In Review" regarding the current state of the City. Mr. Hildebran stated the City has accomplished much and expressed appreciation to all of the Department Directors and Staff.

Please refer to the power point presentation for the full report. It is available for review at www.cityoflenoir.com/budgetretreat.

Mayor Gibbons and Mr. Hildebran reviewed a list of new businesses and/or expansions for 2024 to briefly name a few:

- Aspen Dental
- The Chateau (Wedding & Event Venue)
- T-Mobile
- El Dorado Restaurant
- Rhythm on Main Dance Studio
- Sinister Sweets
- Valvoline
- Shed's Direct Storage Sheds
- Biscuitville
- New Childcare Facility
- Sunshine Daycare & Academy
- Pixel Planet Gaming Lounge

Private Development Underway – Current Projects

Mr. Hildebran reviewed a list of private investment/expansions and improvements for City Council which is included in the attachment.

- NC Farm Bureau is currently building a new office at 1201 Wilkesboro Boulevard.
- UNC Healthcare - In December 2023, Caldwell broke ground on their Capstone Campaign, a \$33+ million expansion to the hospital. The project includes the addition of a new cardiac catheterization lab, clinical lab, inpatient pharmacy, kitchen, and cafeteria.

Google Expansion- the Lenoir City Council and the Caldwell County Commissioners approved economic development incentives for the \$600 million Google expansion of the data center in Lenoir. The City also agreed to provide adequate water services to the facility.

Upcoming Events

Mr. Hildebran and Mayor Gibbons reviewed a slide presentation of downtown Lenoir events to name a few:

- Bootlegger 100 Race
- Neon Night Ride
- NC Blackberry Festival
- Harambee Arts Festival (the City's oldest Festival)
- Mountain to Coast Ride
- Bicycle Festival
- Tattoo & Arts Gathering
- Sculpture Festival
- Wood, Fire, Smoke Festival

Presentation by Danny Wilson, Freese and Nichols

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Lenoir Comprehensive Plan/Parks & Recreation Master Plan Update

What will the Comprehensive Plan Accomplish

- Define the overall community vision and long-term goals
- Establish a Future Land Use Map to guide future development
- Identify potential capital projects and policy priorities
- Create opportunities for community engagement
- Engage residents at the neighborhood-level
- Provide a template for future engagement

Why update the Comprehensive Plan?

- Current Comprehensive Plan was adopted in 2007
- A lot has changed in the past 17 years

- Best practice: review every 5 years and update every 10 years
- NC state law requires localities to have a Comprehensive Plan to have zoning (§160D-501)
- Important to keep plan elements current
- Basis for support of grant applications

Director Williams said several neighborhood meetings were held in June 2024 to July 24 to conduct a background analysis. Plan Development meetings were held from August 24 to May 2025. Implementation Plan meetings were held from June 2025 to July 2025 and a public hearing will be held for finalizing and adoption of the Comprehensive Plan.

Next, Director Williams reported the city has 13 parks and Staff has assessed each one. Councilmember Thomas asked if housing is a part of the Plan and will there be housing diversity. Director Williams stated she would include a background analysis with the Plan.

In addition, Director Williams revived a draft vision statement for the Plan as follows: “Our city is vibrant and inclusive, where residents cherish Lenoir's history, foster safe neighborhoods, and build a thriving, family-friendly environment. We support creativity that enriches our cultural fabric and embraces the region’s natural beauty. As we grow and innovate, we remain committed to diversifying our economic base, ensuring resilience and prosperity for future generations.”

Next, Director Williams presented information about the vision for the West End and Whitnel areas.

Vision for West End

More commercial property
Housing and new homes
Less dilapidated homes
Beautification
Greenways
Beautification
Greenways

Vision for Whitnel –fix line color

Bring “back to life”
More events
Not just a “pass through area”
Clean the area up
More entertainment for children & older population

Director Williams shared that people want more single-family housing, a mix of housing types, mixed use, apartments and townhomes for senior population. Also, people cited more indoor & outdoor recreation along with small retail stores & large retail stores. The public said areas where the City is doing well include fire, police, water & sewer, trash collection, walking trails and street maintenance.

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The Campus Project Update

Jared Wright, Director of Grants and Special Projects introduced David Mauer, Maurer Architecture, Chad Webb and Kevin Conrad, J.M. Cope, Inc., and Matthew Oetting, McGill Associates who are involved with The Campus Project which includes the LHS Auditorium, Gymnasium and band building. He stated he was glad the City has prioritized this project and explained what improvements have been done so far.

Mr. Mauer stated a lot has been accomplished in 2 years and commended Jared Wright for

overseeing this project. Mr. Mauer reviewed slides of amenities, future tenant space and a space for a Farmers Market.

Mr. Matt Oetting with McGill Associates showed slides of an overview of the proposed parking legend including the existing LHS parking and public parking, proposed OVT Pavilion parking, on street parking and walkable range for parking. In addition, Mr. Oetting showed slides of examples of an outdoor gathering area, vending and public restrooms. The auditorium will have ADA restrooms and dressing rooms, an ADA lift to stage, new carpet, seating, new ramp, and window treatment.

Mr. Oetting further showed a site survey of the area around the auditorium. He referred to landscaping along with a drop off area and reported the storm drain runs under the gymnasium. He stated the storm drain will be re-routed to run around the building and mentioned they are complying with the City's stormwater code regarding stormwater retention.

Chad Webb, J.M. Cope Construction Manager shared the design is 90% complete and talked about how to manage the unknown factors.

Director Wright stated a project begins with a pre-qualification process for a 30 day period which creates competitive bidding for the bid phase. He stated this is a buildable project and J.M. Cope is on budget. The band building will be a late phase project. The projected cost is \$1.6 million and they have several different options for the project. Mr. Webb stated they will look at the final details and will focus on getting the best value during the improvements.

Homeless Response Team Program Update

Ben Willis, Executive Director, Western Piedmont Council of Governments (WPCOG) reviewed a power point presentation about the Homeless Response Team. He presented information about the Homeless Response Team members and their background. Their experience includes 26 years of HUD affordable housing experience, 16 years of substance abuse counseling, NCDA facilitating career development, 6 years of mobile crisis assistance, lived experience of homelessness, 7 years of public health expertise-certified domestic violence and sexual assault advocate, 5 years of career coaching experience, certified affordable housing management and housing choice voucher, ministerial experience, and volunteer experience.

He emphasized the WPCOG's goal is to get the unhoused population housed. Mr. Willis said the homeless is a transient population and shared there are a number of senior homeless people as well. Mr. Willis further shared data about their chart of Point in Time Count (PIT) which is done in the winter and summer. This step gives them a baseline to work with, but he said the statistics for each count were basically the same. Also, Mr. Willis reported in the 4th quarter, they reduced the by-names list (BNL) by 15% with a total of 689 individuals currently. This list is remaining current and these individuals are getting referrals to the appropriate services and programs they may need.

Mr. Willis reported they did conducted 43 Police ride along trips with Police Departments in Hickory, Conover, Newton, Morganton, Lenoir, Granite Falls, Valdese and the Sheriff's Department with the office of Alexander County.

Next, Mr. Willis reported there were 24 housing vouchers issued and one client received assistance in deposit and fees, there were referrals for assistance, 11 clients entered detox and/or transitional housing and there were 26 clients housed. In addition, they received 41,058 individual

correspondence including e-mails, phone calls, and text messages.

Mr. Willis further shared they have a Partnering for Warmth program where they utilize collaborative strategies to address homelessness through warming shelters. He stated the WPCOG is the only organization providing this service in the southeast.

Additionally, Mr. Willis stated the WPCOG was chosen to administer \$235,000 of the Day 1 Family Funds for our region. These funds began in January 2025 and will end June 2026. The funds can be used for moving costs, household items, storage units (for 3 months), security deposits, first month's rent, child care, car repairs, work supplies and pet deposits.

In conclusion, Director Willis stated their top 2025 Goals are 1), create an annual report for local governments, 2) expand stakeholders outreach to hospitals, prisons, and schools, 3) host a regional conference, and 4) create a homeless mapping tool.

Please refer to the power point presentation for the full report. It is available for review at www.cityoflenoir.com/budgetretreat.

Caldwell County/Lenoir Housing Plan

Alison Adams, WPCOG, Regional Planning Director gave a power point presentation and stated that property values are not matching market value.

City Manager Hildebran reported the City issued applications for 49 building permits to build new single-family homes which is a 33% increase over 2023.

Planning Director Hannah Williams presented details of permits and tract availability and reviewed areas of development on a map as follows:

Demographics

Survey analysis

Housing Preference

Housing Tours

Interviews

Case Studies of Success

Recommendations

Resources

What We Know

Interest Rates have increased

Product cost is high

Limited financing options

Demand Continues to Outpace Supply

Generational Challenges in Achieving Home ownership

Barriers for First-Time Buyers-affordability

Shifting Market Preferences

Market Gaps-lack of workforce housing

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Review of 2024-25 Strategic Priorities

City Manager Mr. Hildebran reviewed the Strategic Priorities for 2024-25. He reported there were 46 projects including The Campus and Harper Avenue for a total of amount of \$119,502,153.

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Presentation of Grant Funding/Projects Review

Finance Director Donna Bean reviewed several spreadsheets of the City's projects, funding source, description, cost, match (if applicable) and the total amount of the project.

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Facilitated Discussion – Priorities

Next Mr. Starr asked Council to consider what current issues/projects should be continued as strategic priorities for 2025-26. Following discussion, City Council ranked and compiles a list of 2025 City Council Priorities.

City Council's 2025 Priorities

1. Continue efforts to offer competitive compensation and benefits for employees to improve recruitment and retention.
2. Develop options to increase code enforcement and improve beautification in three primary areas:
 - Abandoned and neglected housing
 - Dilapidated commercial properties
 - Appearance of downtown buildings
3. Update the Lenoir Comprehensive Pedestrian Plan and improve walkability.
4. Evaluate long-term Downtown parking needs.
5. Continue to fund and support the Water and Sewer Capital Improvements Plan.

Mr. Starr thanked everyone for the good meeting and great partnership between the Western Piedmont Council of Governments and the City of Lenoir. He stated City Council and Staff cooperates really well, which yields results.

Adjournment

There being no further business, the meeting was adjourned at 2:11 p.m.