

MINUTES
MEETING OF THE VALDOSTA CITY COUNCIL
5:30 P.M., THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 20, 2025
COUNCIL CHAMBERS, CITY HALL

OPENING CEREMONIES

Mayor Scott James Matheson called the Regular Meeting of the Valdosta City Council to order at 5:30 p.m. Council members present were: Eric Howard, Sandra Tooley, Andy Gibbs, Tim Carroll, Nick Harden, and Vivian Miller-Cody. Councilman Thomas McIntyre was absent. The invocation was given by Councilman Tim Carroll, followed by the Pledge of Allegiance to the American Flag.

AWARDS AND PRESENTATIONS

Special Award Presentation for the Valdosta State University Social Media Class.

Mayor Matheson stated that the City of Valdosta is delighted to announce the special presentation of the Valdosta State University (VSU) Social Media Awards, recognizing the outstanding achievements of students from the VSU Social Media Class. Under the guidance of Professor Dr. David Nelson, these students have demonstrated exceptional creativity and innovation in their collaboration with the City of Valdosta Public Information Office (PIO). For over nine years, Dr. Nelson has fostered a fruitful partnership with our PIO, resulting in valuable academic assignments and actionable ideas for our City. These assignments not only serve as educational endeavors for the students, but also provide them with real-life work experience contributing to their professional growth. During Fall of 2024, VSU Social Media students collaborated with the PIO to develop a social media campaign and content ideas aimed at engaging citizens and enhancing the Inspections Department's on-line presence. After immersing themselves in the City's social media platforms, the students created practical social media plans as a key part of their coursework. Their Project focused on using social media to educate the community about the Permits and Inspections processes. Following a thorough evaluation by the Community Engagement Coordinator Kasmira Smith and Inspections Manager Rick Mefford, the winning group, which consisted of Aly West, Meghan Schofield, and David Lee Jordan, was chosen for their exceptional marketing plan presentation. Their proposal featured eye-catching designs, innovative methods to enhance social media presence, effective goal-setting techniques, and strategies to engage diverse demographics across all ages. This ongoing partnership with VSU exemplifies the City's dedication to providing practical experiences for VSU students and engaging them in matters concerning their local government. Mayor Scott James Matheson and the City Council extended their heartfelt congratulations to the winners of the Social Media Project and commended all students for their creative contributions to our community.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES

The minutes from the January 28, 2025 Special Called Meeting were approved by unanimous consent (6-0 Vote). The minutes from the February 6, 2025 Regular Meeting are forthcoming.

ORDINANCES AND RESOLUTIONS

RESOLUTION NO. 2025-1, A RESOLUTION OF SUPPORT FOR NOT OPTING OUT OF HOUSE BILL 581 FOR A FLOATING HOMESTEAD EXEMPTION

Consideration of a Resolution of Support for not opting out of House Bill 581 for a Floating Homestead Exemption.

Chuck Dinkins, Finance Director, stated that the Georgia Legislature entered into the 2024 Session concerned about rising property value assessments and in turn property tax. Senate leaders wanted a measure to control rapid increases in property assessments. Also, House leaders looked to expand sales tax options. Various proposals ultimately resulted in HB 581 and HR 1022. The Georgia House and Senate both backed HB 581 with the Senate voting 52-0 and the House voting 164-2 in favor of the Bill. HB 581 was contingent upon the November Statewide Referendum and had the following major components: (1) Statewide Floating Homestead Exemption, (2) New Local Option Sales Tax, and (3) Property Tax Procedural Changes. If approved, HB 581 would implement a Statewide Floating Homestead Exemption for all local governments (Counties, Cities, and Schools). HB 518 was

passed by the people of Georgia and overwhelmingly in Lowndes County in the November, 2024 Statewide Referendum. HB 581 was signed into law on April 18, 2024 and took effect on January 1, 2025. It introduces a Statewide Homestead Exemption that caps the annual increase in property values for tax purposes. This Exemption limits how much the assessed value of Homestead properties can increase each year based on the prior year's inflation rate. Any governing authority may elect to opt out of the Floating Homestead Exemption created by HB 581 by following a procedure like the "public notification of tax increase" when a full rollback is not taken. The local government must advertise and conduct three public hearings of intent to opt out and later adopt a Resolution. The Resolution must be filed with the Secretary of State by March 1, 2025. If the procedures are not met, "opt out" is not effective. No specific action is required by the law to "opt in"; however, the City wishes to affirm its support of the new law. The City of Valdosta will grant exemption to all homeowners and stay in. A Resolution of Support has been prepared for the City of Valdosta which demonstrates our commitment to "opt in." Chuck Dinkins, Finance Director, recommended that Council approve the Resolution of Support for "opting in" on HB 581.

Councilman Gibbs inquired as to whether this would or would not replace the \$6,500 Homestead Exemption. Chuck Dinkins stated that is a fixed Exemption. This would put in a Floating Exemption so as the values in Valdosta and Lowndes County go up, the real value or market value of the house would continue to rise with it. It would not cap that but the current Exemption that is in place would increase along with that so the net difference would be capped. Councilman Gibbs inquired as to whether this was based on the inflation rate. Chuck Dinkins stated that it was determined by the State Revenue Commissioner and he would base it on the inflation rate.

Councilwoman Tooley stated that if we opt in, the tax on the houses would gradually increase as they have been doing in the past; however, if we opt out, the homeowners' taxes would go up really high. Chuck Dinkins stated that it would depend on how they have their individual house valued. There would be no limit as to what the value could do. As the market goes up, theirs would go up and the taxes would go up proportionately. Councilwoman Tooley inquired as to whether that would be determined by the Tax Assessor. Chuck Dinkins stated that was correct. Each house would need to be revalued periodically.

Councilman Gibbs stated that everybody is in and the option is simply to get out. Chuck Dinkins stated that the default is to be in and you have to take action to be out. Councilman Gibbs inquired as to at what point does this action take place and when will it be put on the ballot as a Referendum to be voted on by the citizens. Chuck Dinkins stated that everything has to be completed by March 1, 2025 in order to opt out. Councilman Gibbs stated that there was a Bill to extend the deadline. Chuck Dinkins stated that there was a House Bill that extended it to the end of March. Then there are three annual windows. If you wanted out for this year, you would have to opt out by March 31st and the next year by March 31st as well. The FLOST would have to go on the ballot and be passed after the opt out window. Councilman Gibbs inquired as to whether we could do it on this year's ballot or can we choose to do it on the next year's ballot. Chuck Dinkins stated that they could do it on a future ballot.

Councilwoman Miller-Cody inquired about the surrounding cities such as Hahira, Lake Park, and Dasher and if they were considering to opt in. Chuck Dinkins stated that they are not putting a referendum of support out and he is not sure exactly what the surrounding cities are intending to do. Richard Hardy, City Manager, stated that he has spoken with all of the City Managers of the surrounding cities in Lowndes County and all of them with the exception of Lake Park are opting in. Lake Park presented it to their Council and they are doing three Public Hearings as required. They still can opt in but they have the option of opting out. They just wanted to do the Public Hearings in case they wanted to opt out.

Councilwoman Tooley stated that if everybody opts in then we do not have to have a Referendum. Chuck Dinkins stated that you would have to have one for the sales tax. Everyone has to stay in so that they are eligible for the Referendum. Councilman Gibbs stated that even if the County opts out it would not affect us. Chuck Dinkins stated that it would not affect our Floating Option Homestead but it would affect our ability to levy a FLOST. Richard Hardy stated that we could still move forward through the General Assembly to make a proposal for the FLOST. Mayor Matheson stated that in House Bill 581, the citizens voted 63% to approve it. House Bill 581 gave us an option to go a FLOST and put it as a Referendum. They said yes to both in that vote and we can pursue a FLOST; however, we now have to ask permission instead of just putting it out there in a March Referendum. Mayor Matheson asked Chuck Dinkins as to what a rough estimate would be in rolling back property