

**BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS
LEON COUNTY, FLORIDA
WFSU Town Hall Meeting
March 20, 2024**

The County and City Commissioners met in a Town Hall Meeting on March 20, 2024, at the non-profit organization The Village Square. Present were Chair Carolyn Cummings, Vice-Chair Brian Welch, Commissioners David O'Keefe and Rick Minor, and from the City of Tallahassee, Mayor John Dailey, Commissioners Dianne Williams-Cox, Curtis Richardson, and Jack Porter. Also present was Clerk to the Board Secretary Beryl H. Wood.

The Town Hall Meeting Commenced at 6:00p.m.

**This is a summary of the County's portion of the Town Hall Meeting.*

David Mullins, General Manager of WFSU Public Media, opened the 12th annual Tallahassee Town Hall Meeting by welcoming attendees and introducing the County and City Commissioners.

Tom Flanigan, Program Director for News at WFSU, served as the facilitator. He directed the first question to Chair Cummings, inquiring about the economic objectives of the County and City, and the strategies in place to achieve them.

Chair Cummings underscored the successful collaboration between the City and County, highlighting Blueprint's pivotal role in attracting Amazon to Tallahassee. She noted the significant economic impact, with Amazon providing \$33 million in salaries and benefits for 15,000 employees, contributing to a total economic boost of \$133 million.

Mr. Flanigan then turned the discussion to the City's and County's efforts to address affordable housing.

Commissioner Minor acknowledged the significant challenge of providing affordable housing in Leon County, citing a recent study indicating a need for 11,500 new affordable housing units by 2045. He noted Blueprint's positive steps but highlighted the absence of funds allocated to this initiative.

Mr. Flanigan asked Chair Cummings about fostering a collegial and safer atmosphere between the City and County.

Chair Cummings responded by emphasizing the importance of setting a respectful tone and fostering mutual respect among Commissioners despite differing opinions and strong personalities. As Chair, she stated that she aims to create an environment where Commissioners can express themselves professionally and respectfully. Her goal is to facilitate discussions that lead to resolutions benefiting the citizens' best interests.

Mr. Flanigan moved to the following topic: Gun Violence. He asked whether it was inevitable or preventable.

Vice-Chair Welch acknowledged the complexity of the issue surrounding gun violence and emphasized the need for a multifaceted approach. He commended Sheriff Walt McNeil for his

valuable service to the community with initiatives like the Anatomy of a Homicide Project. He highlighted that addressing gun violence requires more than just law enforcement efforts. He stressed the importance of having conversations about issues such as family dynamics, school attendance, literacy levels among third graders, and preventing school suspensions. He emphasized the necessity of engaging in difficult conversations and promoting education and job opportunities for young people as part of the solution.

Commissioner Minor highlighted Sheriff McNeil's initiatives, including the Anatomy of a Homicide Project and the creation of a counseling program focused on men and boys. He emphasized that these efforts have prompted the Commission to take steps to support at-risk youth, providing alternatives to street life and gang involvement.

Commissioner O'Keefe stated they have to address the root causes of crime if they are going to make the community safer. He noted the need to invest in education, good jobs, social services, and affordable housing as that is a way to reduce crime and help families, neighborhoods, and communities feel safe. He commended Sheriff McNeil for the counseling program for men and boys. He emphasized the importance of allocating adequate funding and resources to these initiatives to effectively steer young people away from dangerous paths and towards positive opportunities. This approach underscores the Commission's commitment to addressing youth-related challenges and promoting community well-being.

Chair Cummings stated that the Children Services Council funded 11 summer programs to engage close to 1,000 youth. These programs will be concentrated on STEM programs and expose youth to dance and art. She added that they need to teach young people that conflict resolution does not end with gun violence.

Mr. Flanigan discussed homelessness. He mentioned that Governor DeSantis recently signed a bill that bans the homeless from sleeping or setting up camp in public spaces. Instead, the City should designate encampments to concentrate the homeless while providing a minimal level of infrastructure like running water and restrooms. He asked how the City and County plan to respond to this legislation.

Chair Cummings stated she would like to see what rules are put in place. She is concerned about the legislation because it implies that a municipality or a local government permits homeless individuals to sleep in public places. She believes current funding is insufficient and hopes that when the rules are promulgated, provisions will be made to assist the homeless population.

Mr. Flanigan asked Commissioner Minor's opinion.

Commissioner Minor stated that they need to have compassion for homeless people, many of whom have suffered some type of trauma that led them to be on the streets. He also noted that it is not safe to sleep out on the streets overnight. He added that as local officials, they have an obligation to ensure neighborhoods and businesses are safe.

Commissioner O'Keefe stated that this bill would open local governments to lawsuits and would not help solve the homelessness crisis. He added that the evidence for ending homelessness confirms that the most cost-effective way to end this issue is permanent supportive housing.

Vice-Chair Welch stated that the punitive aspects of this bill would not apply until there is no more capacity for emergency shelter, which he believes Leon County is not there yet. He also recalled a similar county ordinance concerning the same issue. He stated that having compassion is not letting people sleep on the street.

Mr. Flanigan moved to the following topic: the Children's Services Council. He stated that the issue is not the duplicated services already provided, but rather the potential re-alignment of County funding for nonprofits, specifically those catering to children, through the CSC as a funding intermediary, if the County realigns its funding of nonprofits by sending the ones that serve children through the CSC as a funding entity. He asked if this approach would create duplication and would that essentially contradict the assurances given to taxpayers regarding the CSC's intended function.

Chair Cummings outlined the establishment of criteria for evaluating service providers to assess their impact on children in designated areas. Additionally, there is concern about the transition of service providers from CHSP to CSC provision, with a two-year moratorium in the County to allow for agreement on funding mechanisms between the City and County. She anticipates that within a year or less, services for children will be streamlined through the CSC, ensuring no duplication, and delivering quality care.

Vice-Chair Welch stated it's about maximizing resources, which are limited at the County. He mentioned that the community has voted for a dedicated funding source to try and fill in some gaps when it comes to the CSC. He stated they are trying to be as efficient as possible.

Commissioner O'Keefe stated that the CSC is an independent entity. The CSC has its own policies, procedures, and rules. They decide what to do rather than the County. He noted that voters didn't expect a reduction in County funding redirected to the CSC. The goal is for service providers to maximize their capacity and choose which funding source works best.

Mr. Flanigan questioned how elected officials, alongside colleagues from other jurisdictions statewide, engage with the Legislature, seeking collaboration and consultation before the Legislature makes significant decisions.

Vice-Chair Welch stated that they remind the Legislature of the County's importance since they are the point of contact. He added that it is important for the Legislature not to serve as local government. He stated that the best way to influence Legislators is to let them know about the importance of local government.

Mr. Flanigan asked if they think it has to do more with the electorate.

Commissioner O'Keefe expressed disappointment with having to inform his constituents when the Legislature has rejected a local government initiative. He emphasized the need to establish effective communication channels with constituents to keep them informed about ongoing developments.

Commissioner Minor stated that the City and County Commissions have the Florida Association of Counties and the Florida League of Cities which are very strong advocates before the Legislature. He added that local governments are closest to the people and are best positioned to manage local issues. He believes that both the City and County Commissions excel in reaching out to their constituents and understanding what they need their local government to do.

Mr. Flanigan inquired about the best method for citizens to provide feedback to both the City and County.

Chair Cummings stated that they are very accessible. She noted that each Commissioner has an email address and telephone number, and any citizen can attend the monthly County Commission meetings.

Mr. Flanigan asked where they wanted to see Tallahassee in five years.

Vice-Chair Welch expressed his intention to encourage private sector economic activity and invest in parks and recreation. He emphasized the importance of welcoming people into the community and making smart choices with public investments. Additionally, he highlighted the need for infrastructure to keep pace with growth to ensure the best quality of life for residents.

Commissioner O'Keefe shared his vision for the next five years, aiming to create thousands of new affordable housing units for families currently burdened by housing costs exceeding fifty percent of their monthly income. Additionally, he emphasized the need to expand early learning opportunities by creating more slots with early learning providers, ensuring families have access to quality childcare and education.

Commissioner Minor outlined his goals, which include enhancing the aesthetic appeal of North Monroe, South Monroe, Pensacola Street, Tharpe Street, and Orange Avenue. He expressed a desire for these areas to undergo improvements that elevate their visual appeal and community impact. Additionally, Commissioner Minor emphasized his vision for Innovation Park to fulfill its potential as a robust research park and economic hub.

Chair Cummings emphasized the importance of fostering greater collaboration with Florida State University (FSU), Florida A&M University (FAMU), and Tallahassee Community College (TCC). The goal is to ensure that graduates from these institutions have compelling opportunities in Tallahassee, encouraging them to remain local. This initiative aims to create more job opportunities that support graduates in purchasing homes and ultimately bolster the local economy and community.

Mr. Flanigan sought the Commissioners' opinions on the City and County's efforts to promote diverse artistic festivals and observances, specifically focusing on events around Cascades Park and the Adderly Amphitheater.

Vice-Chair Welch reminisced about the experience of welcoming the Tallahassee Symphony Orchestra and described it as mesmerizing. He expressed enthusiasm for the potential of Cascades Park and the Adderly Amphitheater, noting that the efforts by the City, County, and BluePrint have created an impressive venue for future performances. In conclusion, he invited the community to check the County Commission website and social media to find out more about local events.

Commissioner Minor mentioned his involvement in the establishment of Tallahassee Music Week for three years, highlighting its incredible experience in celebrating local music. He expressed a desire to further support and develop more local artists.

Commissioner O'Keefe expressed his support for the notion of fostering, highlighting, and ensuring the availability of programs and musical instruments for youth engagement in music. He emphasized the importance of continuing efforts to preserve the qualities that attract people to Tallahassee.

Chair Cummings congratulated the Bicentennial Committee in conjunction with the City and the County. She stated they have a calendar with all of the events for this year. She encouraged citizens to get a copy of the calendar.

Mr. Flanigan moved to the following topic: Food Insecurity. He asked what the Commissions are doing about it, specifically in lower-income neighborhoods.

Commissioner O'Keefe stressed the significance of maintaining existing food programs while also broadening their reach. He expressed interest in investigating potential collaboration with private grocery and fresh food companies to streamline the establishment of new stores, making them more convenient and affordable. This, in turn, would generate employment opportunities and improve the local economy.

Mr. Flanigan invited the panelists to share a positive comment about a fellow commissioner.

Chair Cummings selected Mayor John Dailey of the City of Tallahassee and commended his impactful promotion of the City. She expressed admiration for his efforts in representing Tallahassee effectively.

Commissioner Minor selected City Commissioner Dianne Williams-Cox and conveyed his gratitude for her exceptional leadership and advocacy, particularly in regard to passenger rail service.

Commissioner O'Keefe commented on Vice-Chair Welch's hairstyle, adding a lighthearted moment to the panel discussion.

Vice-Chair Welch selected City Commissioner Curtis Richardson and expressed admiration for him as a role model, particularly highlighting his exemplary qualities as a father. He emphasized that Commissioner Richardson's dedication to the community is evident through his consistent actions that prioritize the community's well-being without any doubt about his motives.

Mr. Flanigan extended his gratitude to everyone for tuning in and took a moment to acknowledge each Commissioner for generously contributing their time to the event.

Adjourn:

There being no further business to come before the Board, the meeting was adjourned at 7:41 p.m.

ATTEST:



Carolyn D. Cummings

BY: _____
Carolyn D. Cummings, Chair
Board of County Commissioners

Gwendolyn Marshall Knight

BY: _____
Gwendolyn Marshall Knight, Clerk of Court
& Comptroller, Leon County, Florida