

**HUNTSVILLE CITY COUNCIL MINUTES**  
**Work Session - September 3, 2024 - 1:00 p.m.**  
**City Council Chambers, Municipal Building**  
**Huntsville, Alabama**

**Members Present:**                    **Mr. David Little, President**  
   **Dr. Jennie Robinson**  
   **Mr. Bill Kling**  
   **Mr. John Meredith**

**Members Absent:**                    **Mr. Devyn Keith**

**Mayor:**                                    **Mr. Tommy Battle**  
**City Administrator:**                **Mr. John Hamilton**  
**City Attorney:**                       **Mr. Trey Riley**  
**City Clerk:**                            **Ms. Shaundrika Edwards**

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**President Little** called the meeting to order at the time and place noted above.

This Work Session of the Huntsville City Council was called by President Little for the purpose of Council discussion and input on the Proposed FY 2025 Budget.

President Little said all Council members, with the exception of Councilmember Keith, were in attendance.

President Little recognized Mayor Battle.

**Mayor Battle** said he would present just an overview, noting that they were still putting the final touches on the budget, and they wanted to hear from the Council members, to see what some of their priorities were, that this was their time to listen to what the Council recognized as priorities and needs for the City.

Mayor Battle said that as had been previously mentioned, this was a challenging budget, that they were not in bad shape, but they were not having the increases they had seen in the past, that rather than 6 to 8 percent increases, they

were seeing 2 to 3 percent increases, and the budget would be predicated as such. He said they were trying to make sure they would meet the needs of the people of the city of Huntsville, noting that was the priority they had every budget season. He said they had so much capacity, and they had the needs and wants out there, and it was their job, as elected officials, to discern what would be the most important things for the community, and that was what this meeting was about.

**Councilmember Robinson presented her recommendations as follows:**

**Councilmember Robinson** said she had met with Mr. Davis and Mr. Hamilton to discuss specific capital needs for District 3, and as she had been in Finance Committee meetings and met with Ms. Smith, the Director of Finance, and Mayor Battle and talked about how this was a very lean budget, it had occurred to her that as Council members, one of the things they could do to help with the Operating Budget would be to look at the allocations, and to perhaps look at some of the entities that were funded with those allocations that they could fund from their own discretionary budget, and she said she was prepared to do that, with funding for the South Huntsville Business Association, so that could be removed from the budget.

Councilmember Robinson said rather than adding anything to the budget, her suggestion was what they could do, as Council members, to help with the Operating Budget, noting that anything they could do to help reduce strain on the budget could benefit employees.

**Councilmember Kling presented his recommendations as follows:**

**Councilmember Kling** said he had a couple of small things, which he noted could come out of existing budgets. He said he would like to see if Recreation Services could identify some money that could be set aside for construction of a pavilion at Pine Park, which had never had one, and he had seen senior citizens

sitting out there watching their grandkids in the playground. He said he thought the cost would be approximately \$60,000. He said that, also, as a casualty of the recent tornado, old trees had come down at the park located on the grounds of the old East Clinton School, and it was a playground that was used by the city. He said he thought a shelter was needed there because there was a need for some shade protection. He said that would be something Recreational Services could look at and see if they could work that in.

Councilmember Kling said that as a plus up, he would like to see the Council Directed Projects accounts raised from \$75,000 per district to \$100,000 per district. He said that overall, he thought this money was well scrutinized, that everything had to be voted on by the Council. He said this would be a plus up of \$125,000. He said they all tried to squeeze that money to get the best they could for the city in their respective districts, and from what he had seen from all five Council members, he believed that money had been well spent.

Councilmember Kling said another plus up would be coming up with about 3 or 4 thousand dollars to be set aside as a line item for a Senior Center appropriation, to be used to purchase art work from senior citizens to adorn the walls at City Hall. He said they had a beautiful City Hall, that he thought their floor was great, and he thought this might be something where either the office staff or individual Council members could get involved as far as selecting artwork they could give to their floor, and perhaps even to other floors, depending on how far this would go. He said this would be a way to show respect and appreciation for their senior citizens, and he thought it would be a good thing.

Councilmember Kling said that, also, any way they could plus up sidewalks, that he thought the Repair and New Sidewalk account could be plused up \$200,000. He said he would make a guess on Road Resurfacing, a ballpark of around

\$20 million for all the accounts, and if there was a way they could plus that up another \$2 million, that would be something he thought would be good for the city as a whole, noting that the city was growing, and this resulted in more wear and tear on the roads. He said this could be citywide, not district related.

Councilmember Kling said in the past, he had brought up residential street resurfacing, and it just never really got out of the gate, that a couple of times it looked like there was support for it, and then the support was not there. He said rather than doing a citywide proposal, he would like to try to get District 4 set up as a pilot district, where they could get two street sweepers, and they could let the Department head pick out what type they would be, the small, self-contained unit or the larger model. He reiterated this would be something that could be done as a pilot program, centered on the District 4 residential streets.

Councilmember Kling said the Council members would then have the opportunity to see this and evaluate it, see how it worked, and if it was something they would want to see expanded. He said this would be something they would be doing for the citizens. He said there was capital money for this type of equipment in Public Works, and this could be something that could be purchased by Public Works or it could be purchased by Landscape Management, in a budget transfer. He said this would be something that would be a positive, that they could try it on a smaller level, and let everybody see it, and in the future, if other Council members thought it would be beneficial for their district, they could look at it and see where they could go from there.

Councilmember Kling said he realized this was a tight budget, and he was just trying to find some creative ways to do some things.

Councilmember Kling said, going back to the artwork, that perhaps they would reach out to the Art Museum and the School System, to see if art classes might have

artwork they would like to have displayed at City Hall, either on a permanent or ongoing basis.

**Councilmember Meredith presented his recommendations as follows:**

**Councilmember Meredith** said he liked what Councilmember Robinson had said about utilizing their discretionary budgets differently, and he thought it would help if they could plus this up, to give them a little bit more to work with. He said even one project could eat that up, and if they could up it, he thought they could get more done.

Councilmember Meredith said he would like to see some money allocated to address the need for sidewalks, on particularly Balch Road and Old Railroad Bed Road. He said the citizens were asking for a pocket park in that area, north of 72, between Jeff Road and Old Railroad Bed Road.

Councilmember Meredith said his colleagues and the Administration had been nice to them, that they would be opening the second phase of Apollo Park soon, and he was aware they had Hays Park, that parks had been well invested in, but a little pocket park in that area was greatly needed.

Councilmember Meredith said if they could, to plus up Street Resurfacing, that it was always great for the citizens to have as smooth roads as possible.

Councilmember Meredith said he would also like to get some funds to Landscaping, noting that they did a good job, and he was not criticizing the job they did, but it would be nice if they could hit certain areas a little more frequently, with a good example of this being the lower end of Zierdt Road, south of Martin Road, noting that weeds got pretty high in that area. He said he knew they were taxed, that they serviced all of the city, but it would be nice if they could cut those rights-of-way a little more frequently.

Councilmember Meredith said a big one was finding some funds for the Food Bank of North Alabama. He said there were a lot of other organizations that depended on the Food Bank for fulfilling their missions, and one of those was Huntsville City Schools. He said they also provided some unique dietary products for senior citizens that played a big role, diabetic-type things, and low sodium, and things such as that that a lot of seniors needed access to.

**President Little presented his recommendations as follows:**

**President Little** said he was more focused on quality-of-life issues, and the top priority would be to make sure the Public Safety departments were adequately funded, which he thought would go without saying. He said they had spent quite a bit of money in the past few years on roads, and he would like to see that, although he was aware they might be tightening the belt a little bit. He said there was also the California Street Park and pickleball courts. He said this had been discussed over the years, and he was aware there were a lot of ideas as to what to do with the California park, to give it new life, that he heard from a lot of citizens about that.

President Little said there was also the sidewalks issue, noting that the Cove area citizens had been pretty vocal about that. He said he was aware there was a project on the horizon for Four Mile Post Road and some other roads, and he appreciated what they were doing on this.

President Little said, concerning what Councilmember Robinson had said about how the Council members could help, and if they needed to look at their discretionary funds to see if they could support some of these outside agencies, he was certainly open to such discussions.

**Councilmember Robinson** said she would like to follow up on her original comments, noting that she had heard a lot about plusing up, and she asked what they were going to do, as a Council, to help manage the Operating Fund in such a way that

they could help the employees, noting that she believed they would all like to see that. She asked, rather than asking for more plusing up, what they could do to help. She said she would put the South Huntsville Business Association allocation of \$50,000 on the table, that she would fund that out of her discretionary fund. She asked what the other Council members would do to help.

**Councilmember Kling** said with what he had brought up, he had tried to be conservative, and there were some existing line items that would take care of some of those things. He said he believed the Council would need to see the budget, and then try to work on that, as far as what their priorities were, how much growth they were talking about. He said he was aware there was health care, and COLAs, and things such as that they would have to deal with. He reiterated that they needed to see the budget, and see what they could put in, and what they could take out that was not as high a priority. He said they could possibly do a scrutiny of some of these agencies and see if they were getting what they expected from them. He said they had contracts with them, and he was sure Councilmember Robinson, as a member of the Finance Committee, and the Finance Director were being very judicious about this, to make sure they were getting the benefits they wanted. He said he was in agreement with Councilmember Robinson, but he thought they should see the final budget, to see what plus ups there were and what would need to come out.

**Councilmember Robinson** said that sitting in the Finance Committee meetings for the last few months, as they had discussed preparations for the budget, it had become very clear that Ms. Smith and the Mayor were very concerned about this budget, and perhaps that was what she was bringing with her to the table at this time, and rather than putting in increases, she felt they needed to look at where they could take some cuts.

**Councilmember Kling** asked Councilmember Robinson how much

additional revenue she thought they were projecting to come in through the year.

**Councilmember Robinson** said she was not at all prepared to answer that, that that would be a question for Ms. Smith, and she did not know that she could even answer it at this time. She said perhaps Mayor Battle could answer that.

**Mayor Battle** said Whitney Gentry was in attendance at the meeting, and she had participated in handling the outside agencies and could explain the process they had gone through with the applications and how they were rated. He said there was a committee of five that had rated these, and he thought it would be good for the Council to understand the process they had gone through for all the outside agencies.

**Councilmember Meredith** said he would like to make a statement before that was presented, and he said this meeting, to him, was a bring-your-wish-list meeting of the Council. He said he understood what was being said, but it seemed to him that the Council should see the budget before they could know where they might take things from.

**Ms. Whitney Gentry, Grants Manager for the City**, appeared before the Council, and she said she had participated in overseeing the appropriations process, that there were five committee members from staff, across the City, and they had looked at all the applications and scored them based not only on the actual applications but also the utilization reports they had done for FY 24 amounts as well. She said they had then made recommendations to Mayor Battle, as he was reviewing these applications as well.

**Mayor Battle** said these five members were from different departments throughout the City, and he asked if there were some members who went out and visited each of the grantees, to make sure they had a conversation with the grantees before coming together to make recommendations.

Ms. Gentry said that was correct. She said they had members from



Community Development, Finance, the City Clerk's office, and the DEI Office, and part of the Council meetings that had been happening for the prior year had included having these agencies come before the Council for a presentation and talk about how the money was impacting the community. She said there were these reviews they were having during the Council meetings, plus the applications, and then also having different members of the City go out and be present for some of the board meetings, et cetera, and this would give a holistic picture of the applicants.

**Councilmember Robinson** asked Ms. Gentry how they would measure impact and effectiveness.

Ms. Gentry said during the FY 24 application process, they had asked the agencies to come up with at least two different goals, and they asked them how they were going to measure those goals, and then during the utilization report process that happened at midyear, they asked them to report on their goals. She said these goals were not nebulous things, that they were actually asking for numbers, how many people were served, what was the change over time, based on the dollars the City had given them. She said they had done the same thing for FY 25, that they had led workshops to tell the agencies how to best measure their impact, and how they were going to be able to hold them accountable during the utilization report process. She said when they had come before the Council, they had asked the agencies to report on their goals at that time as well.

Councilmember Robinson asked if there were agencies who either did not qualify because they did not turn in paperwork on time or that did not show effective impact in their goal reporting, if there were any agencies that were eliminated.

Ms. Gentry replied in the affirmative. She said during the application process, they asked for a couple of different things, kind of on a pass/fail basis, and one of the things they had asked for was a list of their Board of Directors, and there were a

couple of agencies that had not provided that; and they had asked for financial statements, and there were a couple of agencies that had not provided that, and there were also a couple of agencies who just kind of copied what they had done from the year before, just put the exact wording for the current year, and things like that, that would stand out, versus the agencies they could tell put a little bit more effort into it. She said that, also, they had a couple of agencies that were up to a month late in turning in their application, and that was also taken into consideration.

Councilmember Robinson said it sounded like they had developed a good process and were following it.

**Councilmember Robinson** said she believed Councilmember Kling's prior question had been in regard to projected growth.

**Councilmember Kling** said that was correct, new revenue.

Councilmember Robinson asked Mayor Battle if it was correct that in their Finance Committee meetings, they had discussed between two and three percent.

**Mayor Battle** replied in the affirmative.

Councilmember Robinson said she had thought about Councilmember Kling's question, and it would be a very conservative growth.

Mayor Battle said that was correct.

Councilmember Kling asked what that would be as far as dollars.

Mayor Battle said if they looked at two percent, and they had a \$3.5 million budget, they would be looking at an approximate \$7 million increase, and they had to recognize that out of that increase came COLAs, an increased cost of health insurance, and all the other factors that were in there.

Councilmember Robinson said it would be increased costs with the rate of inflation also, that, basically, they would be doing good to stay at level funding.

**Councilmember Robinson** said she was aware this was a budget input

session, and she said her input would be that they really had to be conservative, that they needed to be conservative in their expectations, and maybe that was what this was more than anything, that wish lists were wonderful, but they needed to be conservative in their expectations, that that was what this was more than anything else, that it was just managing expectations.

**Mayor Battle** said he would remind them they would have a second bite at the budget at midyear, and that was one of the things they were looking at very closely, noting they could be wrong in their projections, that they could do much better or they could do much worse. He said that was a great thing about having a Finance Committee that two members of the Council were on, that they could monitor it, and they would know which direction they were going, and at midyear, they would have to adjust, and they might adjust up or they might adjust down, that they had both sides to look at.

**Councilmember Kling** asked if a hiring freeze would be feasible, noting that he was aware they had slotted some slots.

Mayor Battle said he did not think they were at that stage yet, that they were in a comfortable state but just not one there was a lot of leeway in.

**Councilmember Robinson** said another thing was they were not anywhere near having to go into Reserves, and they were very fortunate in that because there were communities across the country that were not able to say that. She said as long as they could be reasonable in their expectations and try to shoot for level funding, and meet growing expenses, as well as the demands of a growing community, where they would need more personnel, she would suggest that that was where the money needed to go.

**Councilmember Kling** asked if in the discretionary account the Council members had at this time, there was a minimum of \$5,000 they could give because

they did not want to overwhelm with paperwork. He asked if they wanted to do more things, if it would be possible that they could go from \$5,000 down to \$2,500, as a minimum.

**Councilmember Robinson** said the issue was how much paperwork they would be generating for the Finance staff, and they would also have to look at how much \$2,500 was to an agency as opposed to \$5,000, if they really wanted to have a substantial impact. She said Councilmember Meredith had made the comment about some of these projects were going to take more, and she said if anything, she would suggest if they really wanted to have an impact with these funds, they would consider increasing that to \$10,000, as they had talked about in the past.

**Councilmember Meredith** said he would not support that, that he had wanted to keep it at the \$2,500 level. He said there were several little things that would mean a lot to certain organizations or programs. He said he had at this time a request from Huntsville City Schools for some of that funding. He said he had given to this in the past, and he was rewarded with a much bigger request at this time. He said the point was, the way they had broken it down, there were certain things that he could fund that were \$1200 or \$1300 that would make a big difference; for instance, paying all the fees a tennis team had to pay to participate. He said that was a number that was well under \$5,000, but that would make a big difference for that tennis team.

**Councilmember Robinson** said her concern with the discretionary funds all along had been that when they had the initial discussion on this, it was about Capital money, and it was coming out of the Capital Fund, and it needed to be used for Capital expenses that directly impacted the city, so in giving the money to nonprofits when they had a process in place for nonprofits, she thought they were subverting the process that was being used.

**Councilmember Meredith** said they had that discussion on limiting it to Capital, and they had decided to go in a different direction. He said there were many small organizations that just would not get funded, that their Capital budget might be \$50,000, and they were not going to compete with the Museum or Huntsville Botanical Garden, and that was where he had given most of his discretionary funds, or to those District 5-based groups that were not otherwise going to get City funding. He said that, certainly, in a year with a tight budget, CNI was not going to get funding, and some of those others were not going to receive any funding, but it was a pretty good chunk out of their annual budget that he, or any of the Council members, could provide to them. He said he thought rather than subverting what the City was doing, it was an augment to those smaller organizations that through no fault of their own, would not be able to get general citywide funding.

**Councilmember Robinson** said she was just not sure this was the best use of taxpayer dollars, but they could agree to disagree on this.

**President Little** said if they needed to, they could always rewrite the ordinance for the discretionary funds down the road.

**President Little** said he had intended to mention the BRT project on University Drive. He asked if that figured into this budget, to some extent. He said he had been learning a little bit about this over the last few years, and he was aware there was a grant process, that they were federal dollars, but the City had to have a little bit of skin in the game.

**Mr. Shane Davis, Director of Urban and Economic Development**, appeared before the Council, and he said the BRT project, Bus Rapid Transit, on the University Drive corridor, was an active project in Planning, taking it from a planning stage to a capital stage, but he thought they were still a way away on this. He said there were Federal Transit funds available, but there were some boxes they needed to

check, from a ridership perspective and different categories, to qualify for these funds. He said they did not quite yet meet those qualifications, but they were working toward that, and they hoped that with the new transit center that had just opened, it would increase the ridership to make that threshold. He said it was not that this project was dead or was going to go away, that it was just kind of on pause, because of not being able to apply to Federal Transit, which they would need that kind of capital to actually implement that project, and there were some boxes in their ridership they needed to increase.

Mr. Davis said they would continue to work toward that, with Transit, Planning, and Engineering, that it was a long-range project at this time.

Mr. Davis said he thought this project would be a great asset to the community, as far as alternate modes of transportation, and they just needed to be able to check some of those federal items to qualify for a grant. He said they were seeing that ridership increase, that they were just a little short at this time.

**President Little** said he had heard that BRT could be a stepping stone, although it might be 20 or 30 years from this time, to light rail, and that was why he was interested in it, noting that one day, there would be trains running around the city.

**Councilmember Kling** asked if there was any way they could get the budget prior to the meeting when it would be presented, so they could look at it, that if they wanted to add something, he thought it was reasonable that they could come up with offsets.

**Mayor Battle** said they were still working on the budget, that they had wanted to hear from the Council before they completed it, and it would probably take a week to finish it, and then it would be coming before the Council at the next Regular Council Meeting.

**Mr. Hamilton** said the Council meeting on September 12th would be when the budget would be introduced. He said the agenda would go live on Tuesday afternoon of that week, and generally things were linked, so that would be when they could see the budget itself. He said at this time, they had not been asked to actually do a presentation, that it would just be introduced, and the Council would have it available, and Ms. Smith would be giving them the typical budget book, and the backup, et cetera, so they could see the details of it as part of that introduction process. He said that the following week, at the September 19th Work Session, the intent was to do a deep dive, with the typical presentations that they saw from Ms. Smith, Mr. Davis, and himself, going into the General Fund and the two Capital Plans, in detail, and then to answer questions. He continued that a week later, at the Regular Meeting of the Council, would be when they would be asked to consider the budget, to vote on it. He said they would see it two weeks and a couple of days prior to the time they would vote on it, or bring amendments, if they were considering that.

**Councilmember Robinson** said it would be 10 days before they would have the Work Session, and at any point, any of the Council members could sit down with Mr. Hamilton, Mayor Battle, Ms. Smith, or Mr. Davis and go through it line by line, so there would be many opportunities.

Mr. Hamilton said that was correct.

Mr. Hamilton said that was what was currently laid out, but, obviously, if the Council wanted to adjust that, the Administration would be responsive to that, that it was just the timeline as it existed at this time.

President Little adjourned the meeting.

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PRESIDENT OF THE CITY COUNCIL

ATTEST:

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CITY CLERK

**(Meeting adjourned at 1:40 p.m. on September 3, 2024.)**