

**TOWN OF ST. JAMES WORK SESSION MINUTES**  
**March 19, 2026**

The St. James Town Council held a Work Session on March 19, 2026 in the Earl Dye Council Chamber. Mayor Toner opened the Work Session at 10:00 a.m.

**Council Members Present:** Mayor Jean Toner, Mayor Pro Tem Jim Board, Councilors Lynn Dutney, Dennis Barclay, and Bill Miller.

**Staff Present:** Town Manager Jeff Repp, Finance Director Pauline Haran, and Town Clerk Jamie Burns

**Others Present:** State Port Pilot Reporter Eliot Duke; Joshua Pratt (PE NCDOT Resident Engineer); James “Steve” Knowles (NCDOT Assistant Resident Engineer); Wes MacCleod of Anchorpoint Planning; David Hopkins, RiverBrook Builders; and 14 residents.

After calling the meeting to order, Mayor Toner welcomed those in attendance and noted the addition of an item to the agenda: an update on the proposed showing of the Constitution film for the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the United States.

**Administration Update**

- a. *NC 211 Update – Joshua Pratt, PE NCDOT Resident Engineer & James “Steve” Knowles, NCDOT Assistant Resident Engineer*

Town Manager Jeff Repp welcomed Joshua Pratt and Steve Knowles from NCDOT, who were attending in-person after having participated virtually in prior updates over the past year and a half.

Mr. Knowles reported that as of the February estimate, the project is 66 % complete, up from 59% at the time of the last update in August. The overall project completion date remains January 2028, with substantial construction completion expected by July 2027, followed by a required 6-month vegetation period.

Barnhill’s schedule for the coming months includes significant grading and nighttime paving in preparation for the major westbound traffic shift, which Barnhill projects will occur between late May and mid-June. Mr. Knowles presented plan sheets showing the traffic patterns during this phase, highlighting that there would be no left turn at Midway when coming from Southport. Instead, drivers would use a new ramp (Ramp YB) that would route traffic around to a temporary signal in front of Lowe’s Food Shopping Center. Large signage will be installed, and a press release will be issued to inform the public. Mayor Toner asked for clarification about the final traffic pattern, and Mr. Knowles confirmed that even in the final configuration, there would be no left turn at Midway onto Oak Island, with traffic continuing to use the bridge system.

When the westbound traffic shift occurs, the Regency Crossing gate will require closure for up to 30 days to allow reconstruction and tie-in to the new westbound lanes. Traffic within the plantation will be redirected to the main gate. It was clarified that this detour is for St. James residents, not general 211 traffic.

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Regarding drainage issues at the St. James entrance, Mr. Knowles acknowledged standing water problems and indicated a ditch will be cut to redirect water to existing storm drainage pipes. Six additional storm drains are planned for that section in the final phase of the project.

The council inquired about timing for discussions regarding median planting enhancements within St. James boundaries. Mr. Pratt indicated that conversations with NCDOT's roadside environmental division would likely begin around the time of substantial completion, prior to the final vegetation period. One percent of the project funding is allocated for aesthetic vegetation improvements to be split among municipalities.

Mayor Toner inquired about the extent of vegetated median coverage. Mr. Knowles explained that normal width grass medians would narrow to concrete at turn lanes and intersections. Mr. Pratt informed council that they would provide a set of roadway plans marked to indicate concrete versus vegetated median sections.

*Steve Knowles and Joshua Pratt left the meeting at 10:26 a.m.*

b. *St. James North Tree Condition and Davey Resources Group Report*

Mr. Repp reported that this item represents the last remaining condition from the conditional use application for the St. James North conditional zoning. The matter, along with a few others, has been tabled from the February and March public meetings to allow the applicant time to complete recommendations and return in April. Since then, a report from Davey Resource Group has been received and reviewed by the Town's engineers at McGill Associates who found the proposed requirements and conclusions to be reasonable. Subsequent discussions between Mayor Pro Tem Board and developer representative David Hopkins resulted in a significantly refined tree preservation condition.

Wes MacLeod summarized the evolution of tree requirements from 12 inches per unit to 6 inches per unit, now further refined based on practical limitations and expert input. The proposal would incorporate the tree species list from the Town's UDO and will be incorporated directly into the conditions for clarity. The method of measurement has been changed from diameter at breast height (DBH) to caliper measurement. The proposed requirements are as follows:

- Single-family lots of 50 feet wide or greater: One canopy tree per lot with a minimum caliper of 2.5 inches, or two understory trees per lot with a minimum caliper of 1.5 inches, measured six inches above the soil line.
- Townhome or lots less than 50 feet wide: One understory tree per lot with a minimum caliper of 1.5 inches.
- Multifamily areas: Existing UDO parking lot landscaping and screening requirements will apply, including canopy trees within parking areas and evergreen screening

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shrubs. An exception provision was proposed for situations where space constraints prevented planting the required canopy trees.

- Shrubs: The minimum mature height for required shrubs has been revised upward from 24 inches to 36 inches for better coverage.

Mayor Pro Tem Board noted that the change to caliper measurement was driven by the fact that the arboriculture industry has moved to that standard for trees under four inches, and that tying the specification to ANSI standards provides a well-understood, enforceable, and nationally accepted benchmark. He also noted a potential provision regarding soil quality around planted trees, though he acknowledged this may be adequately addressed by the existing UDO requirement that planted trees survive for a minimum of one year.

It was agreed that the plan would significantly improve the property's appearance, noting the land has been timbered twice, flooded, and experienced fires, leaving mostly scrub vegetation outside wetland areas.

Mayor Toner thanked all parties for their extensive work and noted that two expert groups (one hired by the developer, one by the town) have reviewed and agreed on the standards. She stated that the collaborative effort has resulted in what she believes will be an aesthetically pleasing development.

Mr. Repp reported that Mr. MacLeod will be revising the conditions to spell out all the work that has been done. Additionally, Committee Drive access issues have been resolved and recorded, allowing public use. Final language regarding storm drainage easements across parcel CM6 is also being finalized. All final documents are expected to be ready for action at the April 4<sup>th</sup> meeting.

*David Hopkins and Wes MacLeod left the meeting at 10:44 a.m.*

c. *Final Review – Town of St. James Website Obituary Posting Policy*

Town Manager Repp presented the final draft of the obituary posting policy for council review prior to formal adoption at the April meeting. The policy provides a process by which family members or authorized representatives may submit obituaries for posting on the Town's website, limited to 250 words. Mayor Toner clarified that the posting is for the website only and that no email notifications are planned. No changes or corrections were suggested. The policy will be placed on the April meeting agenda for formal adoption.

d. *Initial Review – New Chapter 93 – Parades, Picket Lines and Group Demonstrations*

Town Manager Repp explained the background for the proposed new Chapter 93 ordinance governing parades, picket lines, and group demonstrations. Two recent incidents in the past two years have prompted the effort: a situation approximately two

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years ago in which protesters took over the community center parking area during a political fundraiser, and a more recent planned demonstration for “No Kings Day” which the organizer had communicated in a manner that suggested Town sanction, which the Town has not provided. Following consultation with the Town attorney, it was determined that the Town could not prohibit demonstrations on public land but could establish a permit process to direct demonstrations to specific locations and set conduct parameters, consistent with free speech protections. The draft ordinance presented was modeled on another municipality’s existing regulations and was being shared with the Council before being submitted to the Town attorney for legal review. The council reviewed the draft and provided the following feedback for incorporation prior to attorney review and formal adoption:

- The 24-hour advance application requirement should be revised to 72 business hours, excluding weekends and holidays, to allow town staff adequate preparation time.
- The provisions in Section 93-03(c) granting the Town Manager authority to determine whether minor participation is in a child's best interest or would interfere with education should be removed, as this is a parental prerogative. Staff will consult with the Town Attorney to verify whether any North Carolina statute constrains this.
- The prohibition in Section 93-04(b) on dogs and other vicious animals should be amended to except licensed service animals.

The ordinance will be reviewed by the town attorney and returned to the Council for adoption at a future meeting.

e. *January/February Zoning Report*

Town Manager Repp reported 19 total zoning permits issued in January and February 2026 (9 in January, 10 in February). The 12-month rolling total stands at 41 residential permits and 98 other permits. Overall zoning activity is declining, though approval of the St. James North development at the April meeting is expected to increase activity.

f. *January/February Wright Event Center Report & Surveys*

Town Manager Repp reported that the Homer E. Wright Event Center hosted 495 total events in January and February 2026, compared to 459 during the same period in 2025. Revenue billed for the period was \$19,451, up from \$16,797 the prior year. The majority of events, 428, were Tier 1 resident activities generating no direct revenue.

g. *Constitution Film Screening*

The mayor reported on plans for a community screening of "*The American Constitution*," a one-hour docudrama set in 1787 Philadelphia exploring the framing of the Constitution. The film is being shown in selected small towns across North Carolina as a preview in

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advance of a national release as part of the nation's 250th anniversary celebration. The showing is confirmed for Thursday evening, May 21, at the community center, with the film's director in attendance for a question-and-answer session. The cost to the Town for film rights and staff attendance is \$1,000. The Town of St. James is partnering with the Friends of the Library to bring this experience to St. James, and the event will be free to residents. The community center holds approximately 350 people, and the Council agreed that a reservation/RSVP system should be activated in May rather than April. Haran confirmed that the Town's event management software has the capability to manage registrations and that the cost per reservation through the system is approximately \$1 per registration. The event will be included in the April and May editions of the town newsletter.

**Finance Update:**

*a. February 2026 Finance Report (Presented at Meeting)*

Finance Director Pauline Haran reported finances through March 15th, with \$4,820,041 collected and \$3,625,469 spent, maintaining good financial position. She noted that from this point through fiscal year end, the town would primarily rely on sales tax revenue since property taxes were fully collected.

Sales tax revenues were particularly healthy, with over \$301,900 collected in March for January sales. An additional fourth-quarter 2025 utilities payment of nearly \$100,000 was received, totaling approximately \$423,000 in March collections.

Mayor Pro Tem Board noted legislative discussion at a recent Chamber of Commerce event regarding potential redistribution of local sales tax allocations. Mr. Repp confirmed this issue has recurred periodically and that the current methodology distributes sales tax either by population or assessed valuation. The council also noted a House committee recommendation to pursue a constitutional amendment capping annual municipal property tax increases. Mr. Repp offered to calculate potential impacts.

Ms. Haran reported issuing RFPs for audit services to 43 companies with an April 20th deadline, receiving mixed initial responses. Storm debris management RFPs yielded 6 responses while monitoring services received 3, with evaluations underway to make recommendations for the May meeting.

Only one architectural/engineering RFP response was received for event center expansion from Sherwood, the firm that designed the existing buildings. Under the Mini-Brooks Act governing professional services, evaluation focuses on qualifications rather than price, with price negotiation following selection. The single response would be reviewed at the April work session.

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BEMC has installed most new lighting under a grant program, with six (6) fixtures remaining. Ms. Haran noted that invoices are being held pending full project completion so that grant reimbursement can be processed in the current fiscal year.

The AV consultant made another site visit and identified missing system components. He is awaiting pricing for event center shade repairs. The consultant's next step is to provide a comprehensive written proposal covering both buildings for council to review in full and identify any gaps. The expected timeline following contract execution is 8 to 12 weeks for equipment delivery and installation, with an 80 percent deposit required at signing. Town council expressed concern about the deposit requirement of 80 percent.

The employee classification study questionnaires had been submitted to Council of Government (COG) for evaluation, with results expected by mid-May that could impact budget planning. Ms. Haran reminded council of the upcoming Tuesday UNCW speaker presentation on the Plastic Ocean Project.

*b. State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds (SLFRF): Notification of Compliance with Award Closeout*

Finance Director Haran reported that the ARPA grant for the \$2 million water pressure project was successfully closed out and accepted by federal authorities, with requires documentation retention through 2031.

**Adjournment**

Mayor Toner adjourned the Work Session at 11:24 a.m.

Respectfully Submitted,

Approved,

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Jamie Burns, Town Clerk

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Jean R. Toner, Mayor