

## TOWN OF ST. JAMES WORK SESSION MINUTES August 21, 2025

The St. James Town Council held a Work Session on August 21, 2025 in the Earl Dye Council Chamber. Mayor Toner opened the Work Session at 10:00 am.

**Council Members Present:** Mayor Jean Toner, Mayor Pro Tem David DeLong, Councilors Lynn Dutney, and Dennis Barclay.

**Staff Present:** Town Manager Jeff Repp, Finance Director Pauline Haran, Town Clerk Jamie Burns, and Homer E. Wright Event Center Manager Steve Brennan

**Absent:** Councilor Jim Board

**Others Present:** State Port Pilot Reporter Eliot Duke and 17 residents.

*Attending Via Zoom:* James “Steve” Knowles, Michael Baker International/NCDOT & Joshua Pratt, NCDOT.

### Administration Update

a. *NC 211 Update – James Knowles, Michael Baker International/NCDOT*

Town Manager Jeff Repp introduced James “Steve” Knowles from Michael Baker International, representing NCDOT, to provide an update on the NC 211 project. Mr. Repp noted that there has been considerable interest in the project’s status, especially with work starting at the main gate.

Steve Knowles thanked the mayor, town council, and town manager for the invitation. He reported that as of July 2025, the project was 59% complete, up from 52% in December 2024. Mr. Knowles then provided a detailed update, presenting several pictures to illustrate progress:

- Near the Lowe’s shopping center, stone installation and asphalt work are mostly complete. They are now in the process of wedging the existing intersection.
- From Arbor Creek looking back towards the St. James entrance, the existing road has been raised about two feet, stone has been installed and grading work done. Paving is expected to begin within 30 days.
- In front of the Lowe’s Food shopping center, walls have been completed, and grade work is ongoing. Paving is scheduled to start around September 25<sup>th</sup>. Within the next 30 days the barrier rail will be going up on the bridge.
- At Dutchman Creek, structure 1 is completed and traffic is on it. Good progress is being made on structure 2, with a goal to deliver the bridge by the end of the year or early 2026.
- At the canal, the old existing bridge over the canal has been removed and a temporary structural trestle has been installed. Work is progressing on the new bridge. Beams and girders are expected to start being installed around the 2<sup>nd</sup> week of September.

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Mr. Knowles also shared roadway plans and discussed work at the St. James entrance:

- The island has been removed, and in the next couple of weeks, they will be installing stone and asphalt.
- He explained that crossline pipe work will be done at night, while work on the boxes on the sides will be done during the day. Storm drain boxes will be installed during the day and connected at night.
- The project would involve raising the grade and bringing existing 211 up to match the other side.
- Within the next 30 days they expect to be in the area, raising the grade. There will be a smooth transition on 211 into the entrance.

Mr. Knowles then answered questions from council members and the public:

- The anticipated completion date for the overpass is estimated to be mid to late October, barring any weather delays.
- Regarding the timeline for the main gate work, Mr. Knowles explained that asphalt work would be done in the next couple of weeks, followed by storm drain box installation.
- The timeline for shifting traffic to the new road is projected to be around the first of the year.
- Mr. Knowles clarified that once the bridge is completed the traffic pattern would remain similar to the current setup, with the ability to use Old Long Beach Road or the stoplight at that Food Lion to access different directions.
- Mr. Knowles confirmed that the overall completion date for the entire project remains December 2027.
- Mr. Knowles and Mr. Pratt explained that the 59% completion is based on funds expended but closely aligned with work completed.
- Mr. Knowles assured residents that the excavated area along 211 would be dressed up and finished appropriately by the end of the project.

*James Knowles and Joshua Pratt left the meeting at 10:28*

b. *Draft Wright Event Center Space Needs Study*

Town Manager Jeff Repp introduced the discussion on the draft report for the Wright Event Center space needs study. He is seeking final comments from the council and staff to forward to the consultants for consideration as they move from the draft to the final report.

Steve Brennan reviewed his suggestions based on his review of the draft plans:

- Suggestion to move restroom placement away from the front entrance (as shown on Option 2).
- He recommended retaining storage space that would be lost in Option 2
- He supported the idea of creating more lobby space

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- Considering the addition of a hallway to create a larger pre-function space
- Recommendations for higher window placement and a higher roofline in the flexible space
- Ideas for utilizing the exterior patio more effectively, as well as, creating a restroom back by the covered terrace that is accessible to the outdoor patio.

The council discussed these suggestions and agreed that changes needed to be made to incorporate some of these concerns. Mr. Repp stated that Steve would have a conversation with Doug Sherwood following the meeting to ensure all comments are considered before the final report is generated.

Mayor Toner clarified with council the intention to remove fixed tables and bars in the patio area to create a more flexible open space, without enclosing it.

The council expressed a preference for Option B of the draft plans, with the suggested modifications. Mr. Brennan indicated that this option creates a pre-function space in front of the flex space which will make the entire building more useable and allow flow.

Mayor Toner indicated that they envisioned the whole process taking about 18 months. Mr. Repp concluded that he would work on wrapping up the draft report into a final report, which should be available to the council within the next 30 to 60 days. Council thanked Mr. Brennan for his comments.

The consensus of council was that the decision to move on to the next step, which would be a Request for Qualifications for architectural and engineering services for design of the expansion based on Option 2, would be left to the new council after elections in November of this year.

### c. *St. James POA Lease Renewal*

Mr. Repp informed the council that the current lease with the POA for space at town hall expires at the end of the calendar year. He asked for input on whether the town wants to extend the lease and under what terms and conditions.

Mayor Toner recalled that during the last renewal they had asked for information on the cost per square foot for other property lease options. The Town Manager stated there was previously a rent increase of about 3-5% at the last renewal. Pauline Haran, finance director, mentioned that three years ago there weren't many options for lease space, but now there might be more options available to find current rates.

The council agreed to have staff start the process of gathering comparative lease rate information to inform their decisions.

### d. *July 2025 Zoning Report*

Mr. Repp presented the zoning report for July 2025. In July, there were a total of 19 zoning permits issued. There were 4 new construction permits issued and 15 additions/modifications (8 pool installations and other various permits). The running total of permits issued in the last 12 months was 54 new construction permits and 101 others.

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e. *July 2025 Event Center Reports and Survey*

Mr. Repp reviewed the Event Center reports for the month of July. There were 1,579 events held in the facility through July. 1,351 of these were for resident activities. Billable revenue for the year was \$57,878. At the same time last year there were 1,623 events with \$62,000 worth of billed activity. While the number of events was slightly lower than the previous year, revenue was higher.

**Finance Update**

Finance Director Pauline Haran provided the following financial updates:

- Through August 15, the town has received \$200,000 in ad valorem taxes for fiscal year 2026
- Approximately \$500,000 in sales taxes was received, with \$300,000 attributed to the previous fiscal year
- Expenses through August 15 totaled \$882,000, with the largest expense being long-term debt paid in July

Ms. Haran brought up several items for discussion:

- She proposed providing speakers with a \$250 honorarium instead of a thank-you basket. After discussion, the council agreed to consider this change, with debate over amount. Legal has been contacted to see if providing an honorarium is permissible.
- Updates to the personnel policy, including incorporating recent law changes regarding pornography and allowing part-time employees to participate in the 401K plan. She also suggested clarifying that vacation accrual applies only to full-time employees.
- A new bench dedicated to Homer Wright has been installed at the event center.
- The comprehensive plan survey closed with 2,899 resident responses.
- Reminder of upcoming events and dates, including Steve Brennan's retirement celebration, auditor visits, Oyster dinner, and the Meet the Candidates forum.
- The fire truck (pumper) delivery has been delayed until September.
- Consideration of updating the TVs in the building and event center. Mayor Toner suggested that the TVs in council chambers also be angled to make them more visible.

Mr. Repp added that new chairs for the event center are scheduled to tentatively arrive in late September.

Councilor Barclay provided an update on the comprehensive plan, mentioning that he is working on the outline and scheduling meetings with various stakeholders to gather data on infrastructure needs.

**Adjournment**

Mayor Toner adjourned the Work Session at 11:04am.

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Respectfully Submitted,

Approved,

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Jamie Burns, Town Clerk

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Jean R. Toner, Mayor