

Minutes of the Regular Meeting of the City Commission of the City of Auburndale held February 16, 2026, at 7:00 p.m. in the Commission Room of City Hall, after having been properly advertised, with the following members present: Mayor Alex Cam, Vice Mayor Jordan Helms, Commissioners: Travis Avery, Sean Levy, and Crystal Tijerina. Also, present were: Interim City Manager Amy Palmer, Assistant City Attorney Drew Crawford, City Clerk Brandon Henry, and Police Chief Terry Storie.

Mayor Alex Cam declared a quorum present, and the Meeting was opened with prayer by Parks and Recreation Director Cody McGhee, and a salute to the flag.

Motion by Vice Mayor Helms, seconded by Commissioner Avery, to approve Minutes of the City Commission Meeting of February 2, 2026. Upon vote, all ayes.

Interim City Manager Amy Palmer thanked Assistant City Attorney Drew Crawford for filling in tonight. She announced that the Florida High School Athletic Association is hosting their soccer state championships this week. Miss Auburndale softball will have their opening ceremonies on Thursday evening.

Assistant City Attorney Drew Crawford said it is a pleasure to be here.

Motion by Commissioner Avery, seconded by Commissioner Levy, to add Agenda Item #3 Discussion and Selection of City Manager Finalist. Upon vote, all ayes.

Mayor Cam asked if there was public comment on any item not on the agenda.

Dianna Jones, 226 Lake Vista Drive, said she wanted to begin by thanking Vice Mayor Jordan Helms for expressing the need to pause and reflect before making such an important decision. She also appreciates the other commissioners for agreeing that thoughtful consideration is better than rushing into a choice. It was refreshing to see the Commission resist the pressure to automatically select a candidate simply because he had previously worked for the City of Auburndale. If prior employment alone were the deciding factor, there would be little reason to conduct a full interview process at all. In the past, Auburndale has benefited from long-term stability under former City Manager Bobby Green. She said it would be wonderful to see our next City Manager bring that same level of commitment and remain with our community for many years. That is why she is concerned about considering a candidate who has moved frequently from city to city, seemingly in search of the next opportunity. She said she also cannot shake the feeling that Auburndale may not be Mr. Brown's first choice. His comments suggested that he applied here because the city manager position in Cincinnati is not currently available. Perhaps he intended that statement to sound endearing, but it instead came across as "I'll interview here because my preferred option isn't available". It felt as though our town was being treated as a backup plan rather than a place he genuinely wants to live and serve. Auburndale deserves a city manager who sees this community as their first choice, someone who wants to be here, who values what makes this city special, and who is committed to building its future. The other candidates express that desire clearly, and one already lives here. That kind of dedication matters. She strongly encourages the Commission to consider what is best for Auburndale, not only today, but for many years ahead. Our city should never be someone's second choice.

Mayor Cam presented a Proclamation recognizing American Heart Month. Assistant City Attorney Drew Crawford read the proclamation.

Mayor Cam closed the Regular Meeting and opened the Public Hearing.

1. PUBLIC HEARING —ZONING MAP AMENDMENT — EVEREST PROPERTY

Community Development Director Julie Womble said in 2005, the City approved a Planned Development - Commercial 1 (PD-C1) zoning classification for a development known as Ebersbach. The overall development was envisioned to have a mix of uses on 917.35 +/- acres and stretched along the Polk Parkway from Old Dixie Highway to K-Ville Avenue. In the fall of 2008 the project was abandoned, and individual properties of the large development were sold off.

In July of 2021, the City re-established the expired Planned Development -Commercial 1 (PD-C1) on 52.39 acres located on the northwest corner of US Hwy 92 and the Polk Parkway, known as the Everest property. Since then, construction plans were approved for a rehabilitation hospital on the east side of the site closer to the Polk Parkway. In December of 2024, the PD-C1 was modified again (Ordinance #1802) to include multi-family on the east side of the properties and add in permitted future commercial uses that include hospital, surgery center, professional office, medical office, hotel, restaurant (including drive thru) and gas station.

Charles Booker, PE/Traditions Engineering, on behalf of Mark Sparks has requested to amend +/- 2.29 acres of the overall +/- 52.39 acres in order to construct a gas station accessing US Highway 92., which is a permitted use per Ordinance #1802

She presented a graphic depicting the proposal and process. Staff and the Planning Commission recommend approval.

Interim City Manager Amy Palmer said the proposed Ordinance was prepared by the Community Development Department and reviewed by the Interim City Manager and City Attorney. If approved on first reading, the proposed Ordinance will be presented for second and final reading on March 2, 2026.

Mayor Cam asked for citizen comment. There was no citizen comment.

2. ORDINANCE #1847 AMENDING THE OFFICIAL ZONING MAP — EVEREST PROPERTY

Interim City Manager Palmer said staff and the Planning Commission recommend approval.

Assistant City Attorney Drew Crawford. read Ordinance No. 1847 entitled: **AN ORDINANCE OF THE CITY OF AUBURNDALE, FLORIDA, AMENDING ORDINANCE NO. 764, THE LAND DEVELOPMENT REGULATIONS OF THE CITY OF AUBURNDALE, FLORIDA, BY AN AMENDMENT TO THE OFFICIAL ZONING MAP ESTABLISHING A MAJOR MODIFICATION TO THE CITY OF AUBURNDALE ZONING MAP CLASSIFICATION OF PLANNED DEVELOPMENT —COMMERCIAL 1 (PD-C1) ON A PARCEL OF LAND TOTALING +/- 2.29 ACRES; AND PROVIDING AN EFFECTIVE DATE (General Location: us Hwy 92 W. and Polk Parkway).**, by title only.

Motion by Commissioner Levy, seconded by Commissioner Tijerina, to approve Ordinance #1847 amending the Official Zoning Map – Everest Property, as read on first reading by title only. Upon vote, all ayes.

3. DISCUSSION AND SELECTION OF CITY MANAGER FINALIST

Interim City Manager Palmer introduced the item.

Former City Manager Bobby Green presented the process thus far. He suggested each commissioner name their preferred candidate and reasons why that candidate should advance.

Mayor Cam said he was prepared to make his decision at our last meeting, but it was suggested that the rest of the Commission needed some more time, which he understands and can appreciate. He also took this extra time

to think even more about his decision as well. And he can say that he has come back to the exact same conclusion based on what we listed as our preferred qualifications, including experience as a city manager. His choice is still Jeff Brown. Mayor Cam said Vice Mayor Helms agreed that Mr. Brown's resume was impeccable. He said that Commissioner Levy said that he felt we had a candidate that literally checks all the boxes we set out before we undertook this task, but that Commissioner Levy felt another candidate could be with us for a long time. However, there is no guarantee, as the data suggests the average tenure of a city manager is six years. But he believes Mr. Brown gives us the greatest chance of success starting day one. He said Commissioner Tijerina made a great point in saying that managing one specific area may not speak to managing all. Mayor Cam referred to the Code of Ordinances "Under the city manager's duties and responsibilities: general supervision over the police, sanitation, fire, street, cemetery, clerical, financial, and other departments of the city's business". Mr. Brown's experience means that he has the general management experience required to do the job. On October 31st, the Assistant City Manager was willing to step into the role of Interim City Manager at a time when we needed her most in order to preserve the culture of stability in the City of Auburndale. Who can she pass the torch to that gives us the best chance of maintaining that stability? Someone with city manager experience and someone who understands the culture within the City of Auburndale. Mayor Cam said he asked all the finalists what their first 100 days would look like. The next city manager's first 100 days will be our next 100 days. It will also be the next 100 days for city staff and for the citizens of Auburndale. It was said multiple times that this will be the most important decision that we will ever make as city commissioners, which is why it is so important that we make the right decision. And when the Commission considers the millions and millions of dollars that we have to spend to improve our infrastructure, we cannot afford to take a chance. We need to go with experience. To him, the best choice is clear. He said he made it known at our last meeting that his preference was Jeff Brown, but he feels this goes beyond preference. We need someone like Jeff Brown as our next city manager.

Vice Mayor Helms said he spent a lot of time with notes and reading resumes and all kinds of good stuff over the last few days. All three candidates were fantastic. He said he left the meeting feeling like he would be happy to work with any one of these three candidates. But that is not the way it works. We do not pick three city managers, we pick one. He said he had two pages on each candidate from their interview, the resumes. He thanked Ms. Palmer for the reference information and the internet and social media research. He said he tried to stack all that against each other and figure out which candidate really rose to the top for him. And it was really, tough, because it is three great candidates. He said he went back to a set of notes that he had made on the morning of January 21st before we left for Tallahassee, and City Clerk Brandon Henry has them so they can be added to the public record. He said he just made a list of current hot topics he considers whenever he approaches anything with the city. And things that stood out to him included potential changes from the state, the property tax conversation, how does that change what municipalities do? Sovereign immunity changes were already kind of driving up one side of the ledger. Utility service fees and limits being put on those that drive down the other side of the ledger. And really the budgeting process could change overnight. It could rethink municipal government. Hopefully the state, if they make major changes, will give us more time. But still, that is the way it could happen. He said he looked at managing development and he knows we have heard that every city deals with this. But specifically in Auburndale, we know what our constituents want, and we have a major task to provide what the constituents want, do what is legally right by the developers. We want to be good partners to the business community. Then very specific inside of Auburndale, we have some complex code enforcement issues that need to be dealt with. We have hot topics bubbling to the surface. We have a board full of five commissioners. We have served two years each. You guys have been here seven meetings and you are doing a fantastic job. Do not take this as a slight on anyone. Everyone up here is smart enough to do what they are supposed to do. But we do have to at least think that there are things that we are going to need help with, those

budgeting questions, those code questions, things of that nature. Another thing that he wrote down is staff retention and development. We have incredible directors and chiefs in the City of Auburndale and incredible employees all the way down. So making the wrong choice for city manager terrifies him because – he is looking at three employees right here that could go apply for any job they want in any other city and they would take them in a heartbeat. So that one really stood out to him and worries him. That one does cause him to lose sleep. And then lastly, this process really got kicked off tail end of October, right? So with our dates in mind, beginning of April we have a city manager in place. Ms. Palmer has done a fantastic job as Interim City Manager, but he thinks we all understand that for potentially five months we have been keeping it running. There are things that he wants to accomplish in the last two years that he has in this seat. And he needs to make sure that we have got the right partner that he can work with. And he has lost five months, which really stands out to him. He would work with Ms. Palmer on anything. But you also know that we are trying to keep this city running. With all that being said, and he appreciates Ms. Jones' comments and he promises you at no point did you hear him ask if any one of these candidates worked for Auburndale before? Because that has not come into the question at all. But with all these things in mind, literally the challenges ahead of us and what we have to do right now, to him, the start is as important as the finish because of where we are today. So with all that being said, he agrees with Mayor Cam, and he thinks Jeff Brown is our top candidate at this time.

Commissioner Avery said he wanted to thank his fellow commissioners for the time and effort and diligence each one of them have put into this and leading this important decision to hire the next city manager. He said he also approached this with the same level of commitment that the rest of the Commission has. He has carefully viewed the candidates' resumes, the references, the interviews. He said he reached out to residents, business leaders, and stakeholders in Auburndale and the surrounding areas where the candidates have served and are currently serving. While he believes two of the three finalists are well qualified to lead the City, he is wholeheartedly supporting Ben Ziskal for this role. He is confident that Mr. Ziskal can lead with poise, confidence, and consensus-building ability our community needs moving forward. As one constituent put it, he can build a consensus amongst different viewpoints, and another noted that he leads with confidence and connects with those he leads. That said, no matter which candidate the Commission chooses tonight, whether it is Ben Ziskal or Jeff Brown, this decision will shape our City's future starting tomorrow. Whichever one of these two exceptional leaders we choose will have his full and enthusiastic support from day one. Tonight's vote will bring strong, stable leadership to our City, and this Commission will stand united behind our choice.

Commissioner Levy said he thinks Ben Ziskal is the right man to lead us into the future. His expertise in growth management, he is an American Institute of Certified Planners certified planner. Economic developer, he has that certification as well. His career is built on managing land use and development, which is critical as Auburndale navigates major projects like SunTrax and the US-92 corridor. He said he cannot tell everybody how impressed he was that Mr. Ziskal worked with the City of Margate to develop a downtown out of nothing. That takes a lot of work and planning to make something like that happen. He said Mr. Ziskal currently serves as the Land Development Division Director for Polk County. So he already oversees land use, engineering, infrastructure inspections at a macro level. The thing about growth that really connected with him with Mr. Ziskal was his vision for downtown. He said Mr. Ziskal specifically highlighted the need to bridge the gem of Downtown Auburndale with the US-92 corridor to ensure the city feels unified rather than disconnected. He could not agree more. Mr. Ziskal already lives in Auburndale and is a resident of our city, which gives him personal skin in the game. He shares values. He is raising his three children here, coaching Little League, values that Commissioner Levy said he holds dearly. Number three, just strong professional network. He said he knows Mr. Brown knows a lot of people as well, but Mr. Ziskal, in his current county role, he already has established working relationships with

key stakeholders, including the Central Florida Development Council, Polk County Public Schools, Polk Vision. This will allow for a seamless transition without the getting to know you phase that a lot of new managers require. Commissioner Levy said Mr. Ziskal is a man of integrity. That FBI informant story was really impressive. Just shows that he has, solid morals – he has a backbone and he is willing to stand up for it. And then last but not least, the tangible versus intangible. The tangible: he met our basic requirements. He does have 20 years of government experience. So it is not like he is some rookie we are bringing in here that does not know anything about running a municipal government. Commissioner Levy said he was so impressed by his interview. Just, he stood up there, faced all of our questions with confidence, and he really commanded the room. He said he has a lot of respect for that because he could not have done that. No way. With that being said, Ben Ziskel is his choice for our next city manager.

Commissioner Tijerina said she wants to tell everybody how seriously she took this decision. She said she is pretty emotional about it. That is how seriously she took this decision. She said she has spoke to many in the audience and she does not know if it is the luxury, but having known that so many of you are aware and have relationships with both of her top two candidates, Mr. Ziskal and Mr. Brown, that she had the ability to source the community. And she greatly appreciates everyone's time who has called her, who has reached out and offered their support in making this tough decision. She wants both Mr. Brown and Mr. Ziskal to have a place here in Auburndale. But when she joined the Commission, she has heard this no less than 10 times - these are unprecedented times, and in unprecedented times, what she believes our city needs is a leader with experience, with relationships, to lead a transition that is not routine. She believes that our next manager needs to be prepared to step into doing this day one, as we all know, the legislature may make some decisions that change the whole game very soon. She does not believe our city, where we sit today, has the luxury of giving the next city manager time to grow in their role. She said she heard Mr. Brown say that he modernized communication with the community. And she has heard so many of our constituents say how much they need more transparency about what is going on at the city. She said she has taken the opportunity to fact-check Mr. Brown on that, and she was very impressed with Daytona Beach's website. She said she heard him say that he had to go back to the commission and push back and do things that maybe did not feel great talking to his bosses whenever the money did not make sense. She said she thinks we need a very strong fiscally responsible and experienced manager. She cannot speak enough of how highly she found Mr. Ziskal to interview, but she is left with hesitation about the lack of discussion of personnel and budgetary experience. Commissioner Tijerina said she is hiring a leader for our city, not just a development planner, and she needs to point out the fact that she does feel like some of the experiences Mr. Ziskal brought to the table overlap the experience that Ms. Womble and Ms. Palmer both already bring to the city. Because of that, her top candidate is Jeff Brown.

Mr. Green deferred to Commissioner Avery and Commissioner Levy for further discussion.

Commissioner Avery expressed appreciation. There is so much professionalism that we have experienced in this room between Mr. Green, Ms. Palmer, the rest of the Commission on this dais, the City Attorney, City Clerk. He really does appreciate the professionalism that we all share with one another. He said he has watched many videos leading up to this moment of different cities on YouTube. If you want to, you can go back and watch them as well, of commissions and residents that just cannot agree, and they cannot put their own differences aside and become one as a diocese and as a community. When he said what he said earlier that he respects the decision that we make as a whole. When it comes down to it, three of the five here decided that Jeff Brown should be our next city manager, and he stands with the three of you in unison and in support for the remainder of his term on this dais, and we will work together as a Commission and as a community to make sure that Auburndale is the best place to live, work, and play.

Commissioner Levy said Commissioner Avery is absolutely right. Just knowing the other four commissioners up here and how much thought they put into this and the work that went into it and all the phone calls and just reaching out to the community to make sure that we were making the best, most informed decision. Just know that Mr. Brown will have his full support as well if that is what it seems to be tonight. He just wants you to know that he has got my backing as well.

Mayor Cam said Commissioner Avery talked about how we interact as commissioners, and we talk a lot about that culture in Auburndale. It starts with the City Commission. We have our role to play as well. He could not agree more, and he appreciates Commissioner Avery and Levy for sharing those feelings. And at this time, we seem to have reached consensus.

Mayor Cam asked for citizen comment.

Jim Moody, 100 Van Fleet Court, said the Commission did a tremendous job. I'm not talking about the selection, but the process. They really did, and he appreciates it. He appreciates the effort the Commission put into it. He said he sat there in one of those chairs, with a decision we had to make, and he knows what the Commission went through, and he appreciates that. He most especially appreciates Vice Mayor Helms' question, the first one about the restaurant. That has been around for a long, long time, and he has had that conversation, and has that same question come to him probably once every six months. He thinks the Commission made the right decision. He appreciates each and every one of the Commission. He appreciates the job that they do for this city. Thank you and God bless you.

Motion by Commissioner Tijerina, seconded by Commissioner Avery, to select Jeff Brown for the City Manager position and direct the Mayor and City Attorney to negotiate an employment agreement.

Commissioner Tijerina said she does not normally waffle on her decisions. And for everyone that is not leaving here with the candidate chosen that they were hoping that we would have selected today, your voice did not go unheard, and that she very much appreciates your passion for our city. And the phrase was said to her at least three times during this process that we need a breath of fresh air. What she hopes you find is that breath of fresh air is sitting on the Commission, and we hear you and we care a lot about what you need and want.

Upon vote, all ayes.

Mr. Green discussed next steps. He commended the Commission.

The Meeting was adjourned at 7:47:49 p.m.

I HEREBY CERTIFY that the foregoing Minutes are true and correct.



Brandon Henry, City Clerk