



CITY OF STATESBORO
WORK SESSION MINUTES
JANUARY 20, 2026

Mayor & Council Work Session

50 East Main Street

3:30 PM

A Work Session of the Statesboro City Council was held on January 20, 2026 at 3:30 p.m. in the Council Chambers at City Hall, 50 East Main Street. Present was Mayor Pro Tem Shari Barr; Council Members: Tangie Johnson and Paulette Chavers. Also present was City Clerk Leah Harden, City Attorney Cain Smith, City Manager Charles Penny, Assistant City Manager Jason Boyles and Public Affairs Manager Layne Phillips. Absent was Mayor Jonathan McCollar; Councilmembers Ginny Hendley and John Riggs.

1. Fire Service Fee

Ed DiTommso from GMC presented an update on the fire service fee study. He began by explaining that the goal was to establish fiscal responsibility and take pressure off the general fund while ensuring the fire department has the necessary resources to maintain high service levels. He showed that the fire department budget has doubled over the past five years, largely due to staffing increases to accommodate population growth. Without the Special Service District, the department now faces a \$4.2 million funding gap. Most cities use either a fire fee specific to fire services or a millage tax to pay for the services. He explained the differences between fees and taxes for municipal services. Fees are more stable as they are set for specific services, while taxes fluctuate with property values. The proposed fee would be calculated based on land use categories: residential, non-residential, and undeveloped property.

Mr. DiTommso noted that several municipalities in Georgia use different methods for fire fees, with some facing legal challenges. Chatham County lost a lawsuit over their fee structure, while Garden City settled their case and switched to a millage rate. McDuffie County's fee (which uses the same methodology being proposed for Statesboro) was upheld in Superior Court.

The recommended rate structure would be:

- 1¢ per square foot monthly for residential properties
- 2¢ per square foot monthly for commercial properties
- \$5 per acre for undeveloped land (maximum \$200)

This would generate approximately \$4 million annually. The average residential customer would pay about \$23 monthly (\$280 annually), while commercial customers would average \$140 monthly. Comparatively, achieving the same revenue through millage would require about 4 mills. He showed pictures that included comparisons showing how various properties would fare under both systems, and also detailed a credit policy where property owners could receive discounts for having sprinkler systems, fire safety devices, emergency operation plans, and other preparedness measures. Next steps include finalizing the billing methodology, conducting public outreach sessions, developing FAQs, meeting with key stakeholders, and creating informational materials before presenting an ordinance to Council later in the spring.

Fire Chief Tim Grams noted that approximately 25% of Statesboro's property is tax-exempt, which would make the fee a more equitable approach.

City Manager Penny emphasized that while some are concerned about legal challenges, the city must fund fire services one way or another by July 1. He also mentioned that FLOST will provide property tax relief in July 2027, along with new properties coming onto the tax rolls to help with revenue.

2. West Main Streetscape Project

Tom Dunaway from Cranston Engineering presented an update on the West Main Streetscape Project, which includes work on both West and East Main Streets. The project is nearing readiness for bidding, with only a few construction easements still needed from property owners.

Tom Dunaway stated the West Main portion extends from College Street to Railroad Street, while East Main work will be primarily aesthetic. The West Main design will include: Maintain two driving lanes, remove most on-street parking (keeping only 6 spaces), replace parking with enhanced pedestrian corridors, create new hardscapes with brick accents and improved accessibility, add new street lighting and American Elm trees, convert North and South Walnut to one-way streets away from Main Street, add a new parking lot near College Street with 35 spaces (including 3 EV and 2 accessible spaces)

The East Main improvements will include: mill and repave the road, rebuild crosswalks, replace street trees, significant drainage improvements (increasing from 2 to more inlets)

The project will be constructed in blocks from low to high (working toward Main Street). The estimated costs are \$500,000 for the parking lot, \$1.75 million for West Main, and \$1 million for East Main. Final drawings are expected soon, with bid dates to follow.

Council member Shari Barr asked about bicycle racks and tree species. Brad Deal stated they had American elm for the street trees. Brad Deal also confirmed they would look into adding bike racks, particularly near the transit station on College Street. He also noted they've already held stakeholder meetings. City Manager Charles Penny stated they will conduct additional meetings before construction begins to help businesses prepare.

3. Annual Report updates

Layne Phillips, Public Affairs Manager, presented information about the city's first annual report, titled "Reflections Magazine." The 38-page publication will highlight city accomplishments from 2025, provide transparency, strengthen public trust, and increase engagement. The magazine will include news stories, financial breakdowns explaining where tax dollars go, and resident resources such as utility discount programs and rebate information. The report is being produced locally with Davis Marketing Company handling design and layout and Lewis Color handling printing and distribution. It will be mailed to Statesboro residents, business owners within city limits, and city employees. The estimated cost is approximately 75 cents per issue for 35,000 copies, with expected delivery in the second week of February.

City Manager Penny noted that while some residents might question the expense, the publication provides an important opportunity for the city to tell its complete story beyond what space constraints allow in local newspapers.

4. Website update

Layne Phillips, Public Affairs Manager, provided an update on the city's website redesign project, which began in June 2025. The objectives include modernizing the site to better reflect the innovative nature of the organization, making it responsive and mobile-friendly (95% of visitors use mobile devices), improving navigation and search, and enhancing accessibility including screen reader compatibility.

After a competitive process, Revise was selected as the vendor based on their 30 years of experience with government websites. The project is currently in the sitemap navigation phase, with content migration coming in the next two weeks. The target launch date is April 2026. The redesign will also bring the police and fire department websites, which currently operate separately, under the main city website umbrella while maintaining their distinct identities.

Key features of the new website include:

- 24/7 support center
- AI chatbot to help answer visitor questions
- Document center for agendas and minutes
- E-notify system allowing residents to sign up for text/email alerts
- Improved bid posting system
- Language translation
- Content scheduler

Councilmember Shari Barr expressed concern about AI potentially "hallucinating" or providing incorrect information, which Layne acknowledged is a risk they'll mitigate by ensuring content is kept current and accurate.

5. Septic Tank Haulers

Matt Aycock, Director of Public Utilities presented a proposal for the city to resume accepting septic waste, which it had stopped doing in 2013 due to operational challenges primarily related to grease waste from restaurants. He explained that the city has made plant upgrades since then that would allow for accepting residential septic waste (though not grease waste).

Matt noted there is increasing demand for this service, with local haulers currently having to travel to Savannah to dispose of waste, which adds significant expense. He proposed implementing standard operating procedures to ensure operators can regulate what is being brought to the facility. The short-term plan is to begin accepting septic waste starting March 1, 2026, with a fee structure to be presented to Council next month. The long-term plan includes developing a dedicated septic receiving station similar to what Pooler has implemented, where trucks can connect to a screened system that processes waste before it reaches the treatment plant. This has been included in the CIP, and staff are obtaining cost estimates.

City Manager Penny noted that while Bulloch County is exploring similar services in the southern part of the county, that project is still in development and would primarily serve the area along I-16. He emphasized that this service would benefit haulers operating within Statesboro and Bulloch County.

6. CDBG Application

Justin Williams presented information about a Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) application the city is preparing to submit by the April 10 deadline. While the city has focused on housing rehabilitation in recent years, they have not been successful in receiving housing CDBG funding. The last housing CDBG the city received was in 2001 for Statesboro Point.

To avoid missing out on CDBG funding altogether, staff is proposing to shift back to infrastructure projects, which have been more successful in the past. The targeted area includes Roundtree Street and Church Street, neighborhoods where the city has previously done housing rehabilitation and reconstruction. The project would include:

- replacing 1-2 inch lines with 6-inch lines for adequate fire protection
- Water Line Upgrades
- Drainage improvements
- Curbing, gutters, and new sidewalks
- Street resurfacing

The application will request \$1 million with matching funds of \$875,000 from stormwater funds (\$375,000) and water/sewer funds (\$500,000). This exceeds the required 15% match, which will earn the application extra points. The city is currently reviewing bids for engineering and grant administration services, which will be presented to Council on February 3. Public meetings and neighborhood surveying will also take place throughout February.

City Manager Charles Penny emphasized that while the city is not giving up on housing rehabilitation, they need to be practical about what funding they can secure. He noted that city officials had recently met with state representatives to advocate for housing rehabilitation funding, but in the meantime, these infrastructure improvements are necessary for the community.

The meeting was adjourned at 4:57 pm.

Jonathan McCollar, Mayor

Leah Harden, City Clerk